GK: During your career you’ve moved from ancient Sanskrit poetry through the Medieval to the brink of the colonial period. Can you describe some of the stages along this journey?

SP: Let me try to cut into this question by describing some of my recent projects, especially my new book, which concerns the history of Sanskrit itself. I think a lot of Sanskritists are interested in this question, since Sanskrit occupies a strange social location among the classical languages of the world, and many Sanskritists ask themselves early in their careers what exactly Sanskrit was for, who used it and how it differed from other Kultursprachen. In the early 1990s I became interested in precisely these questions and realized - and I think a lot of people have realized this long before I came along - that understanding the history of Sanskrit requires understanding the history of non-Sanskrit. This brought me to the study of Old Kannada.

I first began to study Kannada in Chicago, with my colleague A.K. Ramanujan, trading Kannada lessons for Sanskrit lessons, and then with scholars in Mysore, above all T. V. Venkatachala Sastry. That was a very important moment in my career; for I began to see the powerful interactions between Sanskrit and a local literary language in ways you simply cannot see if you’re looking at the history of Sanskrit divorced from the history of regional languages. Some years later my editor at the University of California Press encouraged me to develop all this into a larger book project that turned into The Language of the Gods in the World of Men.

The new book is a history of culture and power as expressed in the medium of Sanskrit, and what happened when Sanskrit was superseded in the course of the second millennium CE, a period I have called the ‘vernacular millennium’. Given my earlier training as a classicist and belief in the value of serious comparativism, I also look at the role of Latin in the Roman Empire, the very different forms empire took in India and Italy, and the displacement of Latin and Sanskrit and their imperial embodiments through vernacular poems and vernacular polities in the medieval period. There are absolutely stunning symmetries in every sense. It is remarkable to compare the court of King Alfred at the end of the ninth century and the relationship between that developing polity and its attitude towards the Carolingian Empire with their contemporaries in southern India, the Rashtrakutas and western Calukyas, and their cultivation of a Kannada cultural-political region. Sanskrit maintained only a kind of ghostly existence in the literary domain during the latter half of this vernacular millennium. I am well aware that as a language of scholarship it has continued into the present - I studied only in Sanskrit medium with my various teachers in India, including the great P. N. Pattabhirama Sastry - but my book will show that its displacement began long ago, and that by the middle of the second millennium, Sanskrit in many places was no longer relevant in the literary and political spheres. The real creative energies were from then on located in the desha bhashas, the languages of Place.

Sheldon Pollock is a man of many interests. A Sanskritist by training, he is also concerned with history, politics and social theory, while some of his work is controversial. He spoke to Gijs Kruijitzer last December about his career, research, and the politics of writing the pre-colonial.

A pre-colonial language in a post-colonial world

Sheldon Pollock on writing the pre-colonial:

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Was your desire to view literature historically in Literary Cultures in History in any way inspired by the ‘literary turn’ among researchers of colonial history?

SP: No, the literary cultures book didn't come out of any methodological shift in Indian historiography, let alone from a Western literary-theoretical problematic, whether derived from Bakhtin or Derrida, both of which Indians must find inadequate for their materials. It emerged out of a set of issues that poets and novelists and anybody who writes in South Asia has confronted for a very long time, the Indian version of the Questione della Lingua. I’ll give you an example. The Kannada novelist U.R. Ananthamurthy, a friend of mine since the 1950s, did his PhD in England in the early 1960s and could have stayed to become a Salman Rushdie, avant la lettre, of the Anglo-Indian fiction world. Instead he decided not only to go home but to write in Kannada. This was a huge choice—a choice that in the 1960s a lot of post-colonial intellectuals were making, to sort of recapture the desi literary aesthetic and to refuse English. There is an old and interesting essay on this by the poet R. Parthasarathy, another old friend, called ‘Who- ing after Strange Gods’, written when he abandoned English poetry for Tamil. There is sometimes a certain indigenism or nativism in such gestures, which is not my political cup of tea, but Ananthamurthy has no nativism about him at all—he was a cultural-political decision.

there is a convergence between a sort of neo-orientalism and a nativism that wants to somehow disallow a critical historical analysis of pre-colonial South Asia, because critique and history in their view were not indigenous conceptual schemes

Twenty years later I wanted to do a project about the long history of the Ananthamurthy problem, one that in Kannada began around the time of Pampa in the tenth century: poets and writers confronting the choice of how to write, of what language to write in, of which audience to address. These were always choices. In Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism, language diversity is a fatality. It is a sort of negative, biblical vision of language diversity as a curse. As I’ve argued, India has no tower of Babel myth, and in any case language diversity is a product of culture, not a product of nature. Culture does not, in any meaningful sense of the term, ‘evolve’. People actively develop language diversity because it serves their aesthetic, political or spiritual purposes. When and how those choices were made is an important question behind literary Cultures in History. In a place like South Asia, where you have the longest continuous multi-lingual literary history in the world, you have a very big research project. How do you begin

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to explore the problem of literary language choice over a two thousand-year period with dozens of languages? It seemed sensible to develop a collaborative project. I also like collaborative projects for political reasons; if we can’t have a socialist world we can have socialist research projects. So for me there is real political value in collaborative work.

And you see, the Indian material is so much richer than the European, we are able to follow the history of literary culture

in a way that is impossible in Europe. Just look at the depth of the archive. In German or French, for example, you have almost nothing from the ninth or tenth or even eleventh century, whereas India is awash with texts from that era. To pursue this issue one second further: there are certain kinds of history that are very difficult for us to do in South Asia, since we simply don’t have the archival materials. Why not do the history that we have the materials for? And the materials that we have in abundance is literature. Making literature is one of the most important things that South Asians have done with their lives and they have lovingly preserved its written forms in harsh conditions for centuries. There you can really discover something about the history of South Asian sensibilities, standards of aesthetics, about language and modes of social or political identification, about the place of culture in the world of power.

This nativism and what you’ve called the neo-orientalist view of ideas of history, how are they problematic?

SP: There are two ways to think about that. There are definitely multiple temporalities in pre-modern India and multiple ways of encoding these temporalities, as the work of Sanjay Subrahmanyan shows. I think his project of developing more sensitivity towards South Asian visions of time, of change and transformation is very important. The belief that everybody in South Asia before the coming of some western historical model thought in terms of cyclical history strikes me as completely erroneous. But that false assumption is the least of our problems. Much more crippling is the implicit argument that we cannot know anything about a people that they themselves did not know. Even if you grant for the sake of argument that all South Asians through all of time believed in cyclical history, does this mean that scholarship cannot achieve knowledge about a text or event or tradition that the people themselves did not have?

I agree that the only way to know anything about South Asia is to start with South Asia, with the categories and presuppositions and expectations that people in South Asia have had. But there is a convergence between a sort of neo-orientalism and a nativism that wants to somehow disallow a critical historical analysis of pre-colonial South Asia, because critique and history in their view were not indigenous conceptual schemes. First of all this is not true. And secondly, even if it were true, it is irrelevant to our critical project except inssofar as it presents yet another problem to theorize. It is crucial for us to know, for example, that people in the past may have had a geocentric view of the cosmos. But this does not mean that in the past the earth did not go around the sun, or that we cannot know what they did not know or actively reflect on. We should be able to develop a critical historical account of culture which first of all describes the nature of the traditional views, but also probes what they couldn’t see and asks why they couldn’t see it. For me historicism remains an essential dimension of scholarship, even if pre-modern South Asians themselves were not historicists (though they sometimes were). But the old historicism needs to be complemented by a spirit of political-in the largest sense of the term-criticism. These are the two core components of what I would call a critical philology. Let me explain this a little further.

A core problem for me in all this- it occupies the third part of The Language of the Gods - remains capitalist theory, the social theory developed to explain culture and power in the era of capitalism. How to get beyond such theory, which is entirely inappropriate for thinking through non-capitalist culture and power, and what that might mean for a radically different prac-
You said earlier that you wanted to discuss the problems Why have you chosen to compare Sanskrit knowledge sys-

The knowledge system project has three components. (2003);

...teaches at the department for South and Central Asian

is due out at the end of the

is George V. Bobrinskoy Distinguished Service Pro-

...can't be the whole story.

know how important other elements were. When Lord Minto

the conditions for the slow decline of Sanskrit, but I don't

on itself, which wasn't able to communicate, literarily, as effec-

there is a whole world of intellectual production that both Indian scholars and western scholars have

Indo-Persian material because the actual number of people -
you can put this in the interview, I'll be delighted if I am shown

perhaps, it's not as I think it is.

The metaphor of the suffering self can be stretched just so far:

wheels and bruises on an exposed flank are too literal to be abstracted

to a verbal device.
The burning of lashed leather on a buttock or a thigh

is irreducibly what it is.

Drawn blood from a pricked nipple isn't quite inspiration.

As I write this, into the courtyard outside my window waft

muffled moaning and screams countered by the deliberate sound

of hard, rhythmic spanking.

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