You said earlier that you wanted to discuss the problems teaches at the department for South and Central Asian is due out at the end of the project is not meant to be another exercise in Sanskrit knowledge systems rather than say Indian Persianate knowledge systems to European systems? SP: The project is not meant to be another exercise in Sanskrit hegemony. My longer term hope is to develop an ongoing seminar and publication series on the seventeenth century and work with scholars elsewhere, in China, for example, the Middle East, and Europe to do a kind of global intellectual history of the early modern age. But yes, it is difficult to draw in the past is by confronting it is a whole world of intellectual production that both Indian and others work with material. Some westerners may have been insensitive in the past, but this is 2004 and those days are gone, there has to be some sort of openness to these materials.

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SK: Please provide more details on the project. What are the core components of the project? And how does it aim to contribute to the global intellectual history of the seventeenth century?

SP: The project has three components. First, we want to write a book on the history of the disciplines that expressed themselves in Sanskrit in the period 1500-1800. And second, we want to make a bio-bibliographical database (I hope that we will eventually include vernacular language texts and persons who expressed themselves in Sanskrit in the period 1500-1800). And third, we want to have a new and powerful research tool for the history of South Asian intellectual production. The third component is to be an online digital archive of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts. For me that was a very important element because these materials are extremely difficult to get hold of, and can be very hard to read and understand. The idea was to make digital images, put them on our website and let scholars around the world have access to these materials. It would be a goldmine for future scholarship.

SK: You said earlier that you wanted to discuss the problems the project encountered. SP: We ran into problems with Indian libraries from the beginning, where there was a sense of profound disappointment on our part. But also, there is also a sign of a serious problem in international scholarly relations with India. We were able to collect several hundred manuscripts, but at many libraries - Bhandarkar Institute, Adayar Library, Saraswati Mahal in Tanjavur, the Government Oriental Manuscript Library in Madras, Ganganath Jha Research Library, and worst of all, Saraswati Bhavan. Of all the kinds, obstacles were put in our way, and in some cases we were turned away altogether. (No one can even get into some really crucial collections, such as KSSU and MIR Dharbang.) We have even been denied permission to print from microfilm duplicates held in the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. The reasons range from regional chauvinism to xenophobia (one librarian in Allahabad accused us of trying to steal India’s cultural heritage) to what seems almost magical thinking about the loss of a manuscript’s value if it is read. This project is for the greater glory of India, nobody is going to read these manuscripts if not the sort of people working on our project and the students they train. Some westerners may have been insensitive in the past, but this is 2004 and those days are gone, there has to be some sort of openness to these materials.

SK: Why have you chosen to compare Sanskrit knowledge systems rather than say Indian Persianate knowledge systems to European systems? SP: The knowledge system project does not entail Sanskrit scholarship that is why he is so precious to us. You have to create a buzz, you have to show people that, while the Mughal documents are important and the Sufi and other religious texts, so are Indian-Persian moral philosophy, political thought, and literary criticism. What I hope this knowledge system project does is create a sense of possibility for work in all South Asian traditions. People will begin to see that there is a whole world of intellectual production that both Indian and western scholars have simply ignored in favor of the colonial archive, and that has something crucial to tell us about the history of modernity.

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