

M115 JUNE 2014

INDIA ABROAD PERSON OF THE YEAR 2013

Presented by

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COURTESY: ALLISON BUSCH



THE PANDIT



Keeper of a classical past

'India has been very precious to me, as a place where different kinds of thinking happens, thinking you find nowhere else. Nobody else produced a Gandhi. No other place in the world produced a Mahabharata,' Sanskritist **Sheldon Pollock**, winner of the **India Abroad Friend of India Award 2013**, tells **Vaihayasi Pande Daniel** in a fascinating interview



Sheldon Pollock, right, with his teacher — the renowned Kannada writer Dr TV Venkatachala Sastry.

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Should you be in a room interviewing one of the world's more learned Sanskrit scholars, Sheldon Pollock, you would never be alone with just him. Two dozen other characters might roam the room as he speaks.

They would not necessarily be people sharing the same geography. Or even be people of the present.

People who belong to the rich tapestry of characters that the Columbia University professor lives with, day in and day out.

Bhartrihari. Raja Bhoja. Bilhana, Vyasa, Valmiki, Jaimini. Literary people that he brings right back to life in your

presence, as he speaks.

They are, of course, all dead.

Dead folk, Professor Pollock says, he loves conversing with. His conversations with these long-gone poets, writers, playwrights, bard-kings, he feels, are good for his soul. He understands their emotions. When he reads their work he is often moved to laughter or tears. They are not really dead for him. Or truly long gone. They live on forever through their magical words.

The more he reads them, the more they talk back to him.

As you chat with Pollock, the Arvind Raghunathan Professor of South Asian Studies at Columbia, he takes you

HONOR ROLL

INDIA ABROAD
FRIEND OF INDIA AWARD

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Diplomat and thinker
2010

**SUSANNE H RUDOLPH,
LLOYD I RUDOLPH** (2011)

India scholars

MARSHALL M BOUTON (2012)

Scholar and diplomat

Sheldon Pollock

For nurturing one of the world's oldest languages; for his masterful scholarship of Sanskrit; for his dedicated zeal towards the revival of Indian classical literature.

on a fast-moving journey into space and backwards into time to meet his friends.

Pollock first made acquaintance with his vibrant Sanskrit world, when he earned his masters in the language from Harvard in 1973, after receiving his undergraduate degree in the classics, *magna cum laude*, at the same university.

He hankered to be a poet, but going to graduate school to study Sanskrit sounded more promising. Classical studies was a sparsely populated field in those days — what he calls an open terrain — and the tougher the challenges and the further the distance you had to go, academically, to master the language seemed alluring.

"I began to see that there were things that I might be

able to do in Sanskrit that would be more difficult for me to do... There was an intellectual adventurous-ness in Indian studies in those days," he says.

Already married, the father of two children, he had to leave them behind in Boston, for financial reasons, when his studies took him to India. He studied poetry in Sanskrit and other Indian languages and wrote a dissertation under M V Patwardhan, a Sanskrit scholar in Pune, for a year.



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Many more stimulating trips and enriching stints in India followed. He always went to India to find *pandits* to work with. He says he has done that in an “obsessive, unhealthy way” and with a very narrow focus. He didn’t go to India to see the Taj Mahal or the Gateway of India or eat Masala Dosas or the fantastic *dhaba* “trucker” food, which he loves. But only to meet the brilliant minds of India.

Trivandrum. Central Kerala. Mysore. Varanasi (a place he felt revulsed by in the first two, three months: “I began to love Benares. I lived near Asi Ghat up the river and my teacher was at Hanuman Ghat). Delhi. Chennai. Jaipur... And even six months at Sri Raghavendra Swamy Math in a tiny Andhra temple town named Mantralayam, on the border of Karnataka, perched on the Tungabhadra river.

Mantralayam was small and non-descript and there were opportunities to travel further afield to see the historical Vijaynagar and Mughal empire sites. But Pollock never ventured forth, surviving on insipid, monotonous meals — “The food was god awful — Idli-Sambar, Idli-Sambar, Idli-Sambar, day after day after day. And it just didn’t matter to me,” because he spent every available moment with his guru K S Balasubrahmanya Sastry.

As Professor Pollock speaks about his adventures into the world of Sanskrit, you traverse many worlds, several centuries and numerous disciplines — touching base with a bit of political science, giving a nod to philosophy, stopping by on some sociology, skirting a little religion.

A discussion on the Ramayana, for instance, takes us back to 200 BCE and then ahead to the era of Valmiki, Mauryan Emperor Ashoka and to post-Ashokan India. The conversation fast forwards to the Ram Janambhoomi in Ayodhya and to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s *karmabhoomi* and *janambhoomi* and then we wander across the world and flip backwards in time to Virgil’s Rome.

It is a lively, sparkling discussion, peppered with couplets of Sanskrit and the odd Hindi words, that quickly fills in the many gaps in your own knowledge of the classics. Pollock speaking Sanskrit and talking intimately, his eyes glowing, about antediluvian poets, as if they were close relatives, and his personal pride in the profundity of their work is elevating. He uses the term “the deep historic past” many times over, making it sound more delicious and mysterious with each usage, like a place you would like to travel to in your next vacation on Jet Blue.

That’s the quality of Pollock’s scholarship. As his playwright friend Girish Karnad says, it is his ability to deftly make connections between a 11th century poet-rajā’s abstruse Sanskrit poetry and our everyday life in 21st century Hindustan or takes truths from seldom unearthed Sanskrit literature and sees its relevancy in the modern world.

He does not live with his Sanskrit poets in another time — they travel with him, their texts in their luggage, to the



COURTESY: ALLISON BUSCH

Sheldon Pollock, second from left, at an evening to celebrate his endowed professorship at Columbia University, New York, in 2012. He is the Arvind Raghunathan Professor of South Asian Studies at Columbia.

now most certainly a thing of the past.”

In his most seminal work, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, published in 2006, he traces Sanskrit’s voyage through the centuries and its changing role from a medium for poetry and an instrument of the *pandits* to a language of polity, drawing parallels with the trajectory and fate of Latin, among other languages.

In true Pollock style, he brought it bang into the present, pondering the connection of this history of languages with contemporary takes on power and culture.

Pollock does not want to ever attend a funeral for Sanskrit. His agile mind is

constantly grappling with solutions to improve Sanskrit literacy in present-day India or to keep the nation’s ancient languages alive.

He was the editor of the Clay Sanskrit Library that published texts in transliterated Sanskrit, with an English translation, side by side, through the New York University Press.

When funding for that library ran out, after the death of its benefactor John Clay, Pollock was able to partner with Rohan Murty, Indian information technology multinational Infosys co-founder N R Narayana Murthy’s son, to start the Murty Classical Library of India. Rohan Murty donated \$5 million for texts of Sanskrit and other old Indian languages to be published through the Harvard University Press.

Pollock is toiling away at reviving these texts. The works of his favorite dead poets’ society will be eventually accessible, in another few years, electronically to a mass audience.

Your work looks at how Sanskrit, 2,000 years ago, evolved from being a language of ritual to becoming a language of power and then it became a literary language. Then it got eclipsed by vernacular, regional languages. And they are going through the same processes, to some extent. Is that still how you would put it?

You are referring to this book I published in 2006 that tries to make sense of the wonderful and strange thing that Sanskrit is... As I saw the record of Sanskrit, it was a language that had a very peculiar history.

All languages have peculiar histories. Think of Latin, a language spoken by few people, in a river valley in central Italy, all of a sudden becomes a language of an empire across half the world. How does that happen? That’s a strange history.

Well, Sanskrit has a very interesting, curious history too. And it was a history that I felt had never been told... I saw in the record, a movement, from a relatively circumscribed code for ritual practices, to

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something much, much bigger.

I think you can see this happening, over a 300-400-500 year period, from around the last centuries BCE into the first few centuries of the CE, you see something absolutely astonishing happening. All of a sudden Sanskrit inscriptions appeared in Java (Indonesia).

What is that? How does that happen? So that's the history I tried to make sense of, both as a social phenomenon, a political phenomenon and an aesthetic phenomenon, because it is a language of poetry as well as a language of power.

The other part of that book is the end story of this history. What actually has happened to Sanskrit. Do languages live forever unchanged?

There is something very special about Sanskrit because of its highly intellectual history. Scholars, thinkers and poets did try to arrest the development of Sanskrit. So it looks as if it has no history.

From another angle you can see things changing quite dramatically. One of the things that changed was that people began to write poetry in languages other than Sanskrit. Not just write poetry, but live their political lives, their religious lives, in languages other than Sanskrit.

So there is something very important happening to this marvelous instrument called Sanskrit, around the second millennium, around the beginning of 1000 AD, 1100 AD, different parts of India, different times, different things happen. And the rise of regional languages, and their extraordinary careers, had an effect on the history of Sanskrit.

It was no longer the only game in town... One of the things that I found particularly interesting is that something like this happens in Europe too, under very different circumstances. The historic shape of culture and power seemed to have interesting parallels with what goes in India...

In India today regionalism is big. We have gone through eras of big empires, big countries. Even in Europe, it is going back to fragmented states. So what are the linkages of language and power in the world today?

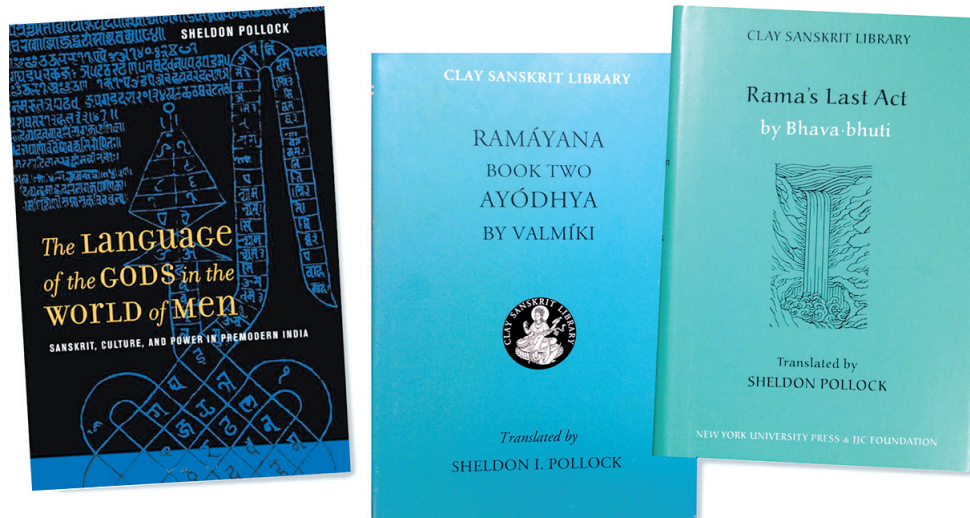
Language is a primordial attachment that makes certain kinds of nationalist movements powerful.

Some of my work, around *The Language of the Gods* book, sought to think about what's different about India in this series of question you are raising.

Why is there no nation state of Tamil Naad? Why is it Maharashtra and not the nation of Maharashtra? Why is it part of some larger world?

This is not a value judgement... There may have been people who have wanted to have Bengal secede from whatever it is part of. But there are centripetal forces pushing these places into the center, rather than centrifugal forces pulling them out.

Now what are those forces and how do they work and what is their history. I don't pretend to have profound



Some of Professor Pollock's works. It's rare to come across such a foreign scholar who speaks to you and illuminates your background, say experts.

insight. I think part of the story of those forces — both the forces of coherence and the forces of disunity — are tied in with issues of language over the very long term. Indeed, maybe even with Sanskrit.

What is the thing towards which these centripetal forces are tugging?

There are people who say there is this historical Bharat Varsh. I think you can look over the long term of Indian history and see large spaces, large visions of polity/politics, of kindred-ness emerging over time. This space had a different shapes at different times in Indian history, but — and I don't want to sound deterministic about this — and languages is only part of a mix.

There are all sorts of other things going on. Sanskrit does represent, in its own way, something of that force that has helped regions think of their trans-regional affiliations and connections. People in Bengal and Maharashtra share something that people in Tamil Nadu and Punjab share...

Historical records, read in a particular way, suggests that there are these linkages and ties and forces of gravity that don't produce Czechoslovakias. I don't know what to make of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Telangana. These are very important sub-regional developments, but nobody wants an independent nation of Telangana...

People seem to want a space for development within a larger space. I guess my question is what is the historical relationship of those kinds of spaces?

What do you want your legacy to Sanskrit and the Indian classics to be?

I don't know whether I want to have a legacy. I have great students.

Developing a form of knowledge — a three-fold knowledge about the world... That's a legacy that I would want...

There is a knowledge that is really historical, where you really think you understand something real and concrete, about how human beings have developed.

That there's a real knowledge and you need serious language study, you need serious historical study to capture it.

There's also a form of knowledge that takes seriously what other people in the past have thought.

India has a lot of people in the past, who follow a lot of things about India — its language, its history, its color. Taking those people seriously is another type of legacy that I would want.

That, I would dare to hope, I would pass onto to my students.

But there is a third type of legacy — in addition to real historical knowledge and respect for the traditions, not uncritical respect, but lively, vibrant sense for the traditions of reception, that have developed in India in the present.

There is an Indian present that is important to the Indian past, just as the past is important to the present. The Indian present is made out of the past, but the Indian past is

always interpreted from a location in the Indian present.

Let me give you a quick example. Consider the Ramayana. I have definite ideas about what the Valmiki Ramayana was about. I think it had something to do with Ashoka, post Ashokan India. I think it had something to do with the nature of power. Something to do with the rise of a certain idiom of Sanskrit that was used for the first time for writing non-ritual text and things. I have a very definite historical sense of that.

I have a very profound respect for the 2,000 years of reception of that text. What people have thought about it. Why they thought the way they did. How it became a text for people that was absolutely true. Not the sort of fiction that I have always thought of it as, but a text that was really true.

What do you do? Do you say to those people: "You are simply stupid. That is a stupid thing to say. Ram was not born in Ayodhya, you moron."

What do you do with a thousand years of people saying this text is a record of god's activities on earth? Do you simply kick them to the curb and throw them in the trash can of history? I want to take those people seriously in some way...

What do you do with the presence of the past in the present? Do you just walk away and say I am just going to study Valmiki Ramayana and maybe the 12th and 13th century commentaries?

Or do you say: Here is a text which has suddenly erupted and irrupted into the present. In 1992, when the Ayodhya-Ram Janambhoomi becomes a site of contestation and the *masjid-mandir* problem — for a moment it looked like it was threatening civil war. What do I do as a scholar?

So the legacy issue would be — in the best of cases — to teach my students that

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there are three ways of thinking through our work. Each of them merits our closest attention simultaneously. That deep historical past, the history of the reception and the present are three equally important dimensions of our lives as scholars...

In all these cases we have to listen very hard to the voices that are speaking and not simply shut them up. I am not saying we have to agree with them. But you have to listen to them.

This is a living history. These are issues that define people's existence in the past and today. These are in some ways the most complicated questions.

These are questions, by the way, that I would never have thought I would ask in 1971. In 1971 I was a classicist of the sort I had trained to be.

Nobody in Rome was going out on the street holding copies of Virgil's *Aeneid* — well Aeneas was not born in Rome. So there was no Aeneas Janambhoomi to look for. But neither in Rome nor in Athens were the epics ever real sources of political mobilization.

You have said that India is on the verge of losing its classical past. You have also said that if India's education and scholarship continue along their current trajectory, the number of texts accessible from the classical era will be a statistical zero. How should Sanskrit be brought back?

I don't think it is just Sanskrit.

It is the entire classical past that is imperiled.

I sometimes feel that in some areas of life I have to be the extremist — I hope a useful extremist... I might have gone to extremes in trying to call attention to the state of affairs in the world today regarding the classical past. I say the world today because India is not unique here.

I often say the case is especially bad in India, because India has so much more to lose than many other places. The slow erosion of classical studies around the world... India may have once been thought of — as my former colleague (*University of Chicago professor and historian*) Dipesh Chakrabarty says — in the waiting room of history, and that other cultures are more advanced, and India is catching up.

I think in many ways India is the guest of honor (*as far as*) history (*goes*). What is happening in India today will happen in the rest of the world tomorrow, in many ways, good and bad.

One of the less desirable things is the erosion of the weakening of the very capacity to read and understand the texts and languages of the past.

How bad is it?

Is it really true that 60 years from now that number of people able to read old Kannada, old Malayalam, Persian, Indo-Persian, Prakrit, Apabhraa, possibly Sanskrit, will have been so small that (*it would be statistically insignificant*)?

I have tried, as best I possibly can, to get clarity on this. I haven't just made this up. I, for example, held a conference in Shimla, (*Himachal Pradesh*) two or three years ago on this question. I invited many, many people to send me names of Indian scholars who were really knowledgeable in classical texts and languages, who were capable and interested in speaking about these questions in a conference to come to Shimla.



Sanskrit scholars from a government-run institution protest against low wages in Kolkata.

I found it extremely difficult to get names. In old Marathi, for example, some of my dear friends have spent their entire lives working on old Marathi. I said to them: Give me the name of an old Marathi scholar who can read a Mahanubhav (*the sect started by Chakradhar Swami who lived in Maharashtra in the 13th century*) text, *Lila Caritra* for example.

"Oh, there is one scholar. He is 85 years old and lives in a *chhota gaon* (*small village*)."

I have spent a lot of time in Karnataka and I kept asking my teacher, the great Dr T V Venkatachala Sastry, to introduce me to some young scholar of old Kannada, who can read 10th century Kannada.

I am not saying there is no one. But if Venkatachala Sastry cannot introduce to me somebody, then I am afraid, that that somebody really doesn't exist.

Sanskrit is better off. Sanskrit is not going to disappear anytime soon. But at the time of Indian Independence there were far more scholars, whose names I could recite to you, in the next hour, who had international reputations, who were writing for an international audience on Sanskrit, who produced enduring work, who really knew the language, knew the history, knew the textual history, knew the literary history, knew the intellectual history.

I personally do not see that cadre of scholars in India

anymore. Maybe I am not looking in the right places. Maybe I don't travel widely enough. Maybe I don't read widely enough. Very possible. From my own experience and anecdotal experience talking to colleagues.

I wrote to very knowledgeable people, these are Indians scholars who come to India all the time, who often live here. I said: "Give me some names." Statistically very difficult to get hard data. Anecdotally I have a lot of data. The data is very dark.

If someone were to come up to me and say: Pollock is a real moron. Here are 50 scholars, who do everything he says they should be doing, I'll say: (*claps his hands*) Hallelujah... The only reason I care is because I think something important, potentially, is going to be lost.

I should say this very clearly. This is not just India's culture. This is my culture too. I don't see any boundaries. Someone once said to me at a conference: "Well, whose culture is this anyway?" He was a young Indian scholar.

I said: "Well, it's mine as much as yours. Just as Heinrich Heine is a (*German*) poet who is part of Indian culture so Bhartrihari (*the first century ruler of Ujjain who became a hero of folk stories*) is a part of the culture that's mine." I don't see ethnic or regional or national or continental boundaries on these questions.

What about India or ancient India has enriched your life...

...I am a scholar... They are people who are concerned with knowledge, the creation and transmission of knowledge. India for me has been a place where I felt I could discover and transmit new forms of knowledge.

...There are people who are scholars in India today, who somehow feel that they may have been Indians in another life. That they have been reborn in New York, as a *videshi*, but really they have the heart of an Indian. They feel a special deep affinity to India.

I admire such people very much. I am not one of those people. I feel affinity for Indians, Chinese, for Latin Americans, for Africans.

India for me has provided a very special arena in which to explore problems of human culture that have been of great interest to me. Such as literature, forms of thought, long-term literacy, ways of living together, mixed communities living together.

There are deep values in Indian cultures, which I have been extremely impressed by, which I have tried to make better known to the world because I think they are values that the world could benefit from.

I am not sure they are entirely unique to India, but the Indian record, because of long-term literacy and commitment to learning, is so much richer than any other record in the world, except for maybe the Chinese.

Unlike the Chinese, the Indians really made the project of living with difference an important part of their culture.

There's a very famous Sanskrit verse. One of my very favourite people in Indian history is a king who lived in what is now Madhya Pradesh. Not far from Bhopal in then an important city and now a small

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town called Dhar. He died in 1055 AD. His name was Bhoj Raja. He wrote many books and in one of his books he describes what I think is one of the great traditional values of pluralism — how to learn to live with other people. He says:

*Śrotavyaḥ saugato dharmāḥ kartavyaḥ punar arhataḥ |
Vaidiko vyavahartavyo dhyātavyaḥ paramaḥ śivaḥ ||*

This is in the context of multiple, competing entities and ideologies and epistemologies and cosmologies in 11th century India. He said you should study Buddhism. You should enact Jainism. You should comport yourself in a Vedic manner. And you should meditate on the highest Shiva. So, four potentially radically conflictual forms of life, for this thinker could be harmonized.

And somehow that verse, encapsulates for me one of the great things of classical India: The capacity to acknowledge, recognize and strive to live with cultural difference. That has been lost in India today. That is a value that could be recovered.

Not gone fully? Going?

I think the capacity to acknowledge the truths of traditions, that are not your own, has been radically diminished in India, as it has been around the world. India is no exception.

Heinrich Heine, the great German Jewish poet, once said: "The Jews are just like everybody else. Only more so."

Indians are just like everybody else. Only more so. They have been losing so much, because they have so much more to lose. Their capacity to live with each other was once great and it is now radically diminished.

I am not a romantic and I fully understand the challenges. But I think people like me, who care about the present and about the possible uses of the past, in the present, have an obligation to say that there was once upon a time a way that people did this differently.

I mean when I was a child I heard this story of a rabbi: Two disputants came to the rabbi. And he said to one of them: "You are right" and he said to the other one: "You are right". And a third person came up to him and said: "You can't tell them that they are both right." And the rabbi said: "You are right."

This is a kind of way of managing difference that somehow modernity has lost and all you have today is people shouting at each other, suing each other, or shooting each other. And there's got to be another way.

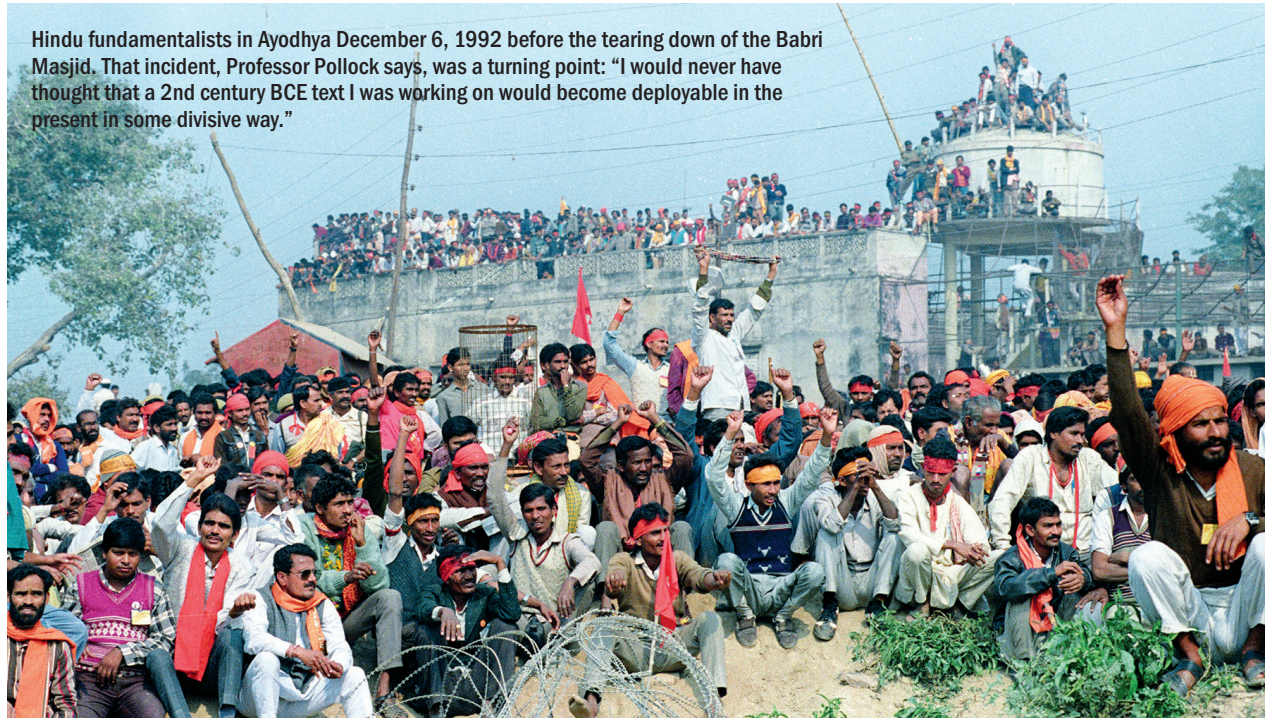
Politics in India today often leans on ancient Indian thought to make political gains, not always in a correct manner. You have written about this a lot ever since it began in 1992. What is your view on this?

The Ayodhya catastrophe was a big turning point for a lot of us. I would never have thought that a 2nd century BCE text I was working on would become deployable in the present, in some divisive way.

That it would be used as a weapon to mobilize and militarize a large number of people, who would do very dangerous things. And I was interested in the history of that.

I felt there was a history to the use of the Ramayana in the political imagination of traditional India. I think it had been used a lot. I was interested in why the Ramayana is

Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodhya December 6, 1992 before the tearing down of the Babri Masjid. That incident, Professor Pollock says, was a turning point: "I would never have thought that a 2nd century BCE text I was working on would become deployable in the present in some divisive way."



SUNI MALHOTRA/REUTERS

seen to appear in the 12th century in Tamil Nadu and 16th century in Rajasthan and 17th century in Maharashtra, under conditions of political danger or competition...

I felt that what was happening in 1992 was a repetition, with change, in — let's call it — an old cultural practice. I wanted to understand it as a historical phenomenon over a 2,000-year period.

What has the Ramayana meant to political thinking in India? Why did L K Advani appear on the cover of *India Today* dressed as Kodanda Rama, with the bow. Why that? I was concerned with the history of this phenomenon — redeployment of old images in the present.

A lot of people feel there is only a kind of single truth about the past. Was there or was there not a temple of Ram on the site of Ayodhya? I always felt that the issues here were more complex than just a simple positivist history of the site.

There is also a history of understanding how the Ramayana was used. There's a history of history. What is the use of history? Who is making claims?

The past in India, like the past in any other place, can be used as a weapon in the hands of people. The Ram Janambhoomi movement in the 1990s was history as a weapon.

There are two things to take away from this. One understandable. The other a little less predictable.

The understandable thing is that if you do not understand history, you will be a victim of those who use history as a weapon. If you have no access to languages, if you know nothing about your past, if you suffer from societal Alzheimer's, how do you defend yourself against history used as a weapon.

There is another less expected way to think about this. It is to say to people who are using history as a weapon. Let's

grant you your truth, let's grant you the importance of your views. Let's not talk about historical truths.

Let's talk about what you want to accomplish with the Ram Janambhoomi movement. With suppressing this book or that book. With the sort of historical anger and historical wounds that you carry over Partition, over whatever it may be that is causing you such pain and driving you to do such things.

Let's find a way to substitute. To replace knowledge with social hope. How do we replace the quest for knowledge with the quest for social hope?

This is something that most historians and politicians do not wish to consider. "There is one truth. Rama was born in Ayodhya."

"There's one truth. There is no such person as Rama."

So we can shout at each other, we can sue each other or we can shoot each other.

That is not going to solve this particular problem of knowledge and hope. So what do you do?

I think that's a conversation that we all need to have. Not just Indians. As I say, it is especially important in India because Indians are just like everyone else, except more so.

The stakes are higher. The passions are more intense. The traditions are longer. People are smarter. Voices are louder.

How do you actually start a conversation that says hope is more important than knowledge? That's what I am interested in.

Now I am a scholar. I don't want to spend the rest of my life hoping. I also want to produce what I think is knowledge. So how

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does someone like me engage in a conversation like the rabbi who said that you are right, you're right, oh you're right too... Or (*Raja*) Bhoja.. (*who wanted to provide space for everybody*). How do you do that in a modern context?

Like in the case of the controversy over Wendy Doniger's book?

(*That*) was a case of a particular scholarship that had a particular historical view of the past. And there were people who had very different views. And there is no current conversation that allows for any way to meet.

People on both sides will say you are complete idiots. You cannot have a conversation...

Part of my position is to say: We have to bring the other side to the table. The other side will say we can't bring them to the table. My point would be: Let's move the table. Let's find a way to move the table so you can bring them to the table.

This is not to abandon hard core historical work. It is to say that we can have more than one truth in our head. Like Bhoja. Or the rabbi. We can all be right. (*We*) have to find some way to make good conceptual senses of that possibility...

This goes against your profession. Is it a sort of a balance that you have to do?

It is a balance. It is a new and very delicate balance.

It is a new way reading. It is a way of reading that says: 'Valmiki wrote the Ramayana in 200 BCE. The Ramayana was never written. It is an eternal text. There never was a person called Rama. There was a person called Rama who was god on earth.'

I believe there is a way to balance these ideas in such a way that we recognize the importance of each other's position and allow each to have its separate truth for its separate practices.

It means that the important thing here is that it comes into the ethical sphere, of granting each other's freedom as a limit. That limit is where that person's freedom begins to encroach upon and deny another person's freedom. So there have to be limits on how far freedoms are allowed to go...

I think real scholarship trains students to grant that humanity on the other side. Because what you learn when you do real scholarship is you learn to listen to people from very different times and places.. and you spend your life trying to understand them, to make sense of them, that's training for the new millennium, that's training for the Bhoja vision.

Without traditional Indian thought I could never say that there was a place and time when this worked. It is not totally Utopian. The word Utopian means no place. Not a good place, but no place.

I think the people, who have the privilege of studying classical India, for all of its troubles, there were real places where people lived lives that we can learn something from.

That some kind of Utopia really existed?

Yes, that some kind of Utopia really existed. I am not naïve. I know that that world was made possible by a lot of human suffering. Profound inequality. There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. I am perfectly well aware of that. But we take away, critique and we take away the good folk.



COURTESY: ALLISON BUSCH

Professor Pollock, left, with Radhavallabh Tripathi, second from right, vice chancellor of the Rashtriya Sanskrit Samsthan, at the Sringeri Math in Karnataka with other Math officials.

Indian playwright Girish Karnad, who knows you well, says that what has always interested him about your work is the fact that it has never roamed in rarer or more abstruse domains. You always applied your knowledge of Sanskrit and history to current situations, giving your scholarship relevance today. Why do you always peer into current India too?

I am 66. I was born in 1948... I came of intellectual age in the heart of the 1960s on the East Coast of the United States. In a sense I am a kind of child of my times.

The general tendency among young scholars in that period — even classical scholars or linguists or literary scholars — was to think about a relationship to the present world.

The big word in those days was relevance. What is the relevance of this, or that, to our lives?

It was partly opposition to US foreign policy, opposition to the Vietnam War, our understanding that to put in a simple-minded way: Everything was connected with everything else.

So if you were a classical scholar reading (*Greek tragedian Sophocles' play*) *Antigone*, you asked about the relationship, not just between the individual and the State in 5th century Athens, but you thought about the individual in New York City or Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1966.

That's one general perspective on why people like me have naturally felt a commitment to thinking about the present even as we think about the past.

As I became a little bit more mature, *I hope*, I realised that my position about the presence of the past had a philosophical grounding.

There was a famous Italian philosopher name (*Benedetto*) Croce, and Croce once said that all history is contemporary history. The idea being you cannot think about the past without thinking about the present.

Epistemologically, just the very nature of how we understand the past, is inflected by our position in the present. This is sometimes called philosophical

hermeneutics, to give it a fancy name, but there is a sophisticated analysis of why young kids like me, in the 1960s, felt that the present and the past were important to bring together.

Now the present for me, if I think about the material I work on — Indian culture, Indian literary history, Indian intellectual history — the present is not just my own personal present, but it is the present of the culture and society that produced the work/material that I work on.

So it is a perfectly rational and a reasonable extension to say what is the relevance of this text — the Ramayana, let's say, a very ancient text from South Asia — to contemporary India, both

because of my own historical being as a child of the '60s and also because of this philosophical position about all history being contemporary history.

It is perfectly reasonable to ask what does this material mean to me, why should I care about it, but what does it mean to the inheritors of these great traditions today...

... When I talk about the inheritors of these great achievements of Indian culture, great works of literature or systems of thought, I consider myself as much an inheritor as my Indian friends and colleagues.

I wasn't born in my *karmabhoomi*. It is not my *janambhoomi*, but it is my *karmabhoomi*.

(*Laughter*)

It is interesting that you laughed.

One of the things that it is troubling about the present, contemporary moment, for people like me, or for me, and this is inevitable, I suppose, words and concepts from the past that are part of the Sanskrit tradition, have, to some degree been captured by political forces in the present...

It is not just any present of India that is interesting to me. It is the present present. And the present present is quite different from what it has been for many years.

That could have some good aspects to it and some bad aspects?

I am not making any judgement of the election, the outcome of the election, the future of India under the BJP, or about Mr (*Narendra*) Modi's personal politics or even past history.

But if you look over the last, I would say, 50 years in India, if you broaden your purview to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, you will find similar tendencies, but invoking other traditions.

I think the dominant tendency over the last 50 years has been a politicalization of the Sanskrit tradition.

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The Sanskrit tradition has always been political in some sense. All cultures have a politics just as all politics have aspects of culture. That's why in this book I invented this term culture power to try to make clear that human history is about the delicate negotiation between these two forces.

So there has always been a politics in Sanskrit and there's always been a certain culture to politics in the long sweep of Indian history.

My point is that in the last 50 years — these are hard questions and very few people talk about them openly and critically and knowledgably, with a sense of the deep past — as a friend of India and a long-term observer, words like *janambhoomi* and *karmabhoomi* — to take that particular case, have been captured, so to speak, by a certain politics in India today that makes it difficult to use those terms in a non-political way...

With the same sound? Without sounding like them?

Exactly, exactly. Without sounding like people who have a particular politics.

Let me give you a silly example. Maybe it will resonate. I have a friend, a Kannada writer, (U R) Ananthamurthy. Bangalore was a big center — I don't know if it still is — for the Sathya Sai Baba movement. A lot of people would take the plane down.

Once he was on a plane and someone on the plane was passing out *vibhuti*, you know ash that had been touched by Sathya Sai Baba. It was like a commodity. Like a contemporary commodity.

There was an elderly, very traditional gentleman in the plane with Ananthamurthy, *dhotiwallah* type, very traditional. Somebody came up to him and said here is some *vibhuti*. He said: "No I don't take it. I am a very traditional man."

The old tradition had a non-commodified sense of this precious material, the sacred ash. And in the present day it has somehow become commodified and I don't say cheapened...

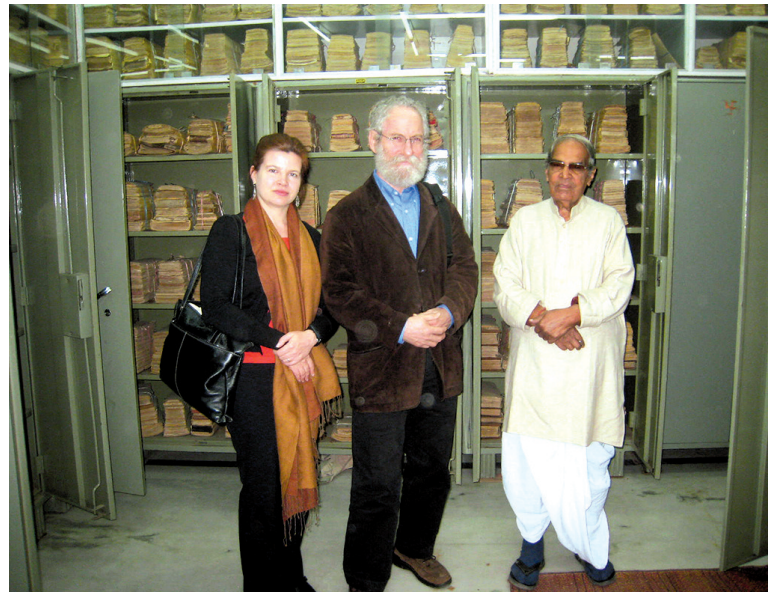
No longer profound?

It doesn't have the same resonance yes. And you feel funny, odd, uncomfortable, pretending that it is. This is the same with the *janambhoomi-karmabhoomi* business. It has taken on a different tone.

I think the Sanskrit tradition has taken on a different tone from what it used to be. Let me give you one more quick example. I had a teacher. He has now passed away. In Benares. A South Indian pandit named Pattabhirama Sastry. A very, very celebrated scholar. One of the great scholars of India in the 1940s-'50s-'60s, comes from a very celebrated lineage of pandits from Madras.

He was one of the heads of the Vishwanath Mandir in Benares. He was head of the traditional *pathashalas* in Benares, a man of really profound learning and many disciplines. You don't get more traditional.

He told me a story once, which I have never tried to verify, but there was no reason for me to doubt the veracity of it, but I have a slightly vague memory of the dates. The high court of Allahabad had summoned him or subpoenaed him to give testimony against the (*Akhil Bharatiya*) Hindu Mahasabha.



COURTESY: ALLISON BUSCH

Professor Pollock and his wife Allison Busch after viewing manuscripts in Jaipur.

excitement about classical traditions.

And in India?

India is much more complicated. I get several responses depending on who the interlocutor is.

The most common response is guilt. Cultural guilt. "Oh my grandfather was a great Sanskritist. Our traditions have fallen off. And I learned a little Sanskrit in school and I don't know any now and I wish I did."

I get that response hundreds of times.

It is totally true that many of the brilliant young scholars, software developers in places like Bangalore, are the grandchildren and great grandchildren of highly literate Sanskritists. Or Persianists.

There were great traditions of Persian and Arabic studies in India as well. Long traditions of literacy. It is the young successful kids of today, who have those gifts of unbroken literacy.

That's one response I get — cultural nostalgia and guilt for the loss of tradition. And recognition that their families were, once upon a time, great devotees of this form of knowledge.

The second response I get is: "Why are you doing this when there are so many other important problems in India?"

The third response is: "Oh you must be RSS (*the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) or you must be a cultural conservative if you are studying this." And this is a canard that you find in the West too, that somehow there is a linkage between classical studies and conservative politics.

Somebody in *The New Yorker* said two or three years ago in respect of (*philosopher*) John Stuart Mill, that a commitment to classical culture is a commitment to conservatism. This is a complete canard...

There was something I felt, when I was sitting in that room where you were lecturing in Mumbai. Or when you were speaking, just now, about Varanasi. The Varanasi you were talking about, or what you were speaking in that room.. in my mind all these things are coming to an end in some ways.

Varanasi will always exist, but will true learning and an understanding of knowledge and understanding of Hinduism continue to exist in Varanasi?

When you were speaking in that room how many people understood what you were speaking about or its import? Isn't it all declining?

It is a very worrisome situation. When I first started going to India, in the early '70s, on the train you would get a cup of Chai in a little clay cup. (*When you were done*) you would throw it out the window and it would go back to the earth. Those were aesthetically very beautiful, those clay cups. They were highly appropriate for Hindustani Masala Chai. The Chai tasted different in those little clay cups. Those

They wanted to adopt the cow as their election symbol. The Election Commission — I don't know the full details, because this was all going on in Sanskrit. I don't know how to say the Election Commission in Sanskrit (*smiles*) — took the Hindu Mahasabha to court.

They summoned Sastry and asked him about the matter. He said the cow is a very ancient symbol and it cannot be appropriated by this or that political party. Again like *vibhuti*, *janambhoomi-karmabhoomi*, the cow had sought be appropriated and somehow politicized in a narrow way by a political party. That's what I am talking about.

I should add this as a foot note: These people, my teacher told me, *gheraoed* his house after the court case, they stoned his house for days, they forced him and his family to flee Benares. He eventually returned.

But this was the treatment received, by possibly one of India's five greatest *pandits* of the time, for resisting this narrow, partisan politicization of the Indian culture. That is what I am talking about.

When you are in India, when you are in America or any other country when you tell people you are a Sanskritist, what kind of reactions does it evoke and what do they understand?

When I was a student in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I would sometimes hitchhike. One time I was picked up by a professor at MIT. I was a junior in college.

He said: "What are you studying?" I said: "I am studying Sanskrit."

He said: "Oh is that writing on sand?" This was a professor at MIT.

In those days — this was in the late '60s — Sanskrit was like Urdu, a crossword puzzle word for many people. Things have changed in the last 20, 30 years.

Sanskrit is much more on the map of humanists. I think when people write books these days about classical studies, they cannot not mention Sanskrit.

Sometimes it is still a conversation stopper. "Oh you study Sanskrit. What is that?" Sometimes it is: "Oh that's really cool!"... Generally speaking, there is a lot of goodwill and

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little clay cups were the natural accompaniment for Chai. Those are gone now. All you get is plastic horrible cups.

This is a sort of metaphor for what you are putting your finger on.

This deep transformation. This is what I meant about the sincere, energetic affection for a culture that prompts you to care for it in some way.

Is it inevitable that the clay cups, and everything like them, are going to disappear from India, over the next generation? It is astonishing what has happened in the last 30 years. Is it inevitable that it will all get lost.

Is there something that well-meaning, honest, sincere people can do to adapt? These are the big questions. I have thought about my little part of the world, my little area of interest in the world — my clay cup — how do you save that? What do you do to save that?

The great teachers — now I am 66 — *Shashti Abdha Poorthi* (marking of 60 years) has happened, so I no longer work with *pandits* anymore.

When I go to India I do my own thing. I don't seek out *pandits*. I think it is in part, because the people — although India is a big place, and it is very dangerous to generalize about India, and I do too much generalization for my own good — but the kind of teachers who I used to work with are fewer.

Those are my clay cups, which have disappeared already. I don't think there is any way to get those people back. They grew up in a world that is gone. They grew up in an educational system *gurukuls* that are really disappearing. And what is the appropriate modality of enhancing classical studies or music or dance in a world which is so rapidly changing? These are the really big questions.

The biggest question is the future of the planet... My disappointment with the Indian elections and with the vision for India in the next century is the failure to think about development and climate.

I know that sounds slightly off topic, but it is not off topic. Some very good friends of mine wrote columns in newspapers that the choice is either secularism or development. We have had secularism for 10 years and now we need development.

It is not an either-or thing?

Neither is it an either-or thing, but India could show the way...

If India becomes China, I think the planet is finished.

That is the biggest context within which all of my little sort of things like preserving classical studies... if you have the end of civilization, as we know, it then it doesn't matter whether you have *gurukuls* or industrialized Sanskrit colleges where nobody learns a damn thing. ...

There is a way in which India has been very precious to me, as a place where different kinds of thinking happens. Thinking you find nowhere else.

Nobody else produced a (*Mahatma*) Gandhi. No other place in the world produced a Mahabharata. In some sense India could be the place where radically different thinking about climate change and what to do about it *could* happen.

You have often said that reading Sanskrit is good for the soul.

If one has never read an ancient language, or a language from far away, and long ago, one can't understand the exceptional pleasure of trying to finally make sense of the



COURTESY: ALLISON BUSCH

Sheldon Pollock and Allison Busch celebrate their granddaughter Elea's 10th birthday in Jaipur last November. Also at the celebration were Pollock's daughter Mica, a professor at University of California, San Diego, and Jonah Pollock Castiglione.

language. There is a deeply satisfying, aesthetic pleasure in trying to understand.

And the more distant the text, the greater the pleasure somehow. It is wonderful to read 17th century French or 3rd century Latin. But a Sanskrit text, like the *Mimamsa Sutra* (an ancient philosophical text written by the scholar *Jaimini*) from the 2nd century BCE, just to try to make sense of that text, and finally believing you have made sense of it, is deeply satisfying to me.

The distance you have to go?

The distance you have to go in time and space.

There is another aspect, that most of us don't bring to mind, but which is really happening. And you get this vividly when the text is far away and long ago. You really are speaking with a dead person. When you are reading a text you have an uncanny experience of speaking with the dead.

If you really bring that to mind, it is a very unsettling, but a deeply satisfying unique experience. Of course, it is hard to ask the dead person questions. But, in a way, you can.

You read further and further and you have questions and eventually the dead poet will answer your questions. It is really amazing.

The sheer pleasure of figuring something unknown, the uncanny experience of speaking with the dead... There's also the content of the work. There are two ways in which the content is good for the soul for me. They are kind of contradictory.

One is the recognition of similarity. My favorite poet in India is Bhartrihari. We know very little about Bhartrihari. We don't even know if there was a Bhartrihari who wrote these poems... One way it was good for the soul for me was what I call this recognition of similarity between me and

Bhartrihari. (*Laughs*).

When Bhartrihari speaks I really hear myself. I mean I consider this a lower form of goodness for the soul — the recognition of yourself in someone else.

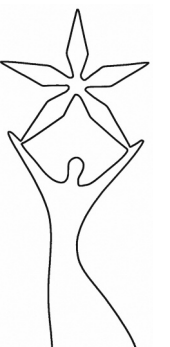
Bhartrihari has a wonderful poem. He says: 'My hair is grey, my face is furrowed with lines, my arms and legs are stiff, I am an old man... *tr̥ṣṇaiva taruṇāyate... the only thing that remains young is my desire*.'

It is one of his great poems. I cannot even give you the translation without being moved by it. Extremely simple, deeply profound recognition, of the basic Buddhist sense of this core problem of desire...

The second aspect — it is the recognition of dissimilarity. That this world is very, very different from my world. When you sit down and read a work like the Mahabharata, you are reading about a world that is completely different, in many ways completely different from mine... recognizing the huge dissimilarity, as well as a similarity, from my world.

It is true that other worlds are similarly dissimilar. India — I don't know where I can begin to try to chart out this world of dissimilarity — it is really vast. It is really profound. It is really different and it is really valuable.

Just take this issue of authorship. It is a small issue, but it is my clay cup. The big tradition in the West for many decades, many, many centuries now has been the celebration of the individual artist. It has turned into incredible issues of intellectual

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‘He has got a beautiful mind, a mind that goes far beyond Sanskrit’

Writer **Gurcharan Das** hails Sheldon Pollock’s ability to make Sanskrit come alive

Sheldon and I share a common mentor. The person who taught him Sanskrit taught me Sanskrit. It was a long time ago, when I was an undergraduate at Harvard. This was in the early '60s... We are both *chelas* (disciples) of Daniel Ingalls (professor of Sanskrit at Harvard). Shelly went on to become a great professor of Sanskrit. I ended up doing philosophy.

(Later) I was very interested in reading the Mahabharat. Chicago was the place to go. Shelly was a professor there. So was Wendy (Doniger). Shelly and Wendy attracted me to Chicago. I sat in the Regenstein Library and read the Mahabharat. So we met again. The most exciting thing that I had read of his, which really attracted me to him, was his essay on the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

The Sanskrit cosmopolis is a way of thinking about the world. Shelly contrasts the Roman Empire, through which Latin spread around the world. Power led to the spread of Latin whereas what led to the spread of Sanskrit was the power of the language. There were no kings spreading Sanskrit...

Our paths crossed again because I was suddenly invited to write a foreword to one of the volumes of the Clay Sanskrit Library. It was Shelly who invited me. They invited non-Sanskrit scholars. It was one of the battle books of the Mahabharat, that contain the best poetry. I was delighted to write that introduction. The thinking in that essay I wrote led to my book — *The Difficulty of Being Good*.

Shelly and Allison were spending a short holiday near Bombay, at Alibaug, where we have a beach house, going back 40 years. Shelly read my book *The Difficulty of Being Good* and then very generously gave a nice endorsement for it.



COURTESY: ALLISON BUSCH

Sheldon Pollock has contrasted the spread of Latin through the Roman Empire with the spread of Sanskrit: Power led to the spread of Latin whereas Sanskrit spread due to the power of the language.

say is my privileged connection with Shelly.

He has got this very wonderful beard (laughs) and he has got a very attractive wife. He has got a beautiful mind, a mind that goes far beyond Sanskrit and makes connections with issues that we have today. He makes Sanskrit come alive.

He has written about the crisis in the classics in India. If you want to read Sanskrit you don't now study in India. You have to go abroad. When I was thinking of reading the Mahabharat, people said 'Why don't you read it in Benares?' But I had to go to Chicago (because of) the scholars of Sanskrit (there).

We are not producing those scholars of Sanskrit anymore. With the salaries going up in the academic world in India, maybe we will produce some more. Hopefully, some of Shelly's students will come back to teach in

India at these new universities — Ashoka (in Haryana) and Shiv Nadar University (in the National Capital Region) who are emphasizing the humanities.

He is amongst the best (scholars) I would say, no question about it.

The quality of the mind.

The curiosity that a great scholar has.

The rigor to pursue, and the talent also.

(When we meet) we (usually) talk about what's happening in the country. We talk about the state of Sanskrit scholarship. I am always interested in what he is working on. ■

As told to Vaihayasi Pande Daniel.

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property. *I own this poem.*

Indians have a far more flexible authorship. One of my students wrote a very fine paper — a series of poems attributed to a 11th century poet named Bilhani called the *The Collection of Fifty Verses by a Love Thief*. It is pretty clear that some of these poems existed long before Bilhana was ever born.

So there is a sort of floating authorship. You can call Bilhana a sign. Bhartrihari is a sign for a certain style of

poetry. A lot of poets could contribute they could all be called Bhartrihari. Nobody owned Bhartrihari. Nobody put a copyright on Bhartrihari...

It is impossible to believe that there was a single Vyasa. The Mahabharata is the most extraordinary composite authorship problem in world literary history. It is a text that spans five or six centuries in its creation. And everything happily lived under the Mahabharata umbrella. It was a flexible text with a flexible author. You don't find that anywhere else to the same degree...

For me reading Sanskrit, as something good for the soul, is, to recognize the infinite adaptability and complexity of the human spirit. It is not always the same everywhere.

People have lived very different kinds of lives, from which we today can learn if we can access those materials. If we can access those materials, we have something important to learn about dissimilarity or difference, about the historical contingency of our own lives.

It doesn't have to be like this. We can recognize a common humanity. There is similarity. We can have this extraordinary experience of speaking with the dead. We can have the purely intellectual experience of figuring out something we didn't know before. ■

‘His theory of how Sanskrit developed as a culture, rather than as a language, is mind-boggling’

Celebrated Indian playwright

Girish Karnad is constantly amazed at Sheldon Pollock’s work, revealing how the umbra and penumbra of Sanskrit culture spread

In 1984, the United States had a Festival of India. At the end of that year, in 1985, the Department of South Asian studies at the University of Chicago had a seminar. It was the most important Department of South Asian studies at that time, Milton Singer, A K Ramanujan (*were part of it*). I was invited to speak. That’s when I met Shelly Pollock. I was most impressed.

A lot of the Americans and Indian scholars sneered at him. They thought he was a Marxist ... He was seen as not someone who is a pure Sanskritist. But I was very impressed. Everything he said was concrete. It was about Mauryan inscriptions, I think. He was looking at the Mauryan inscriptions and trying to understand Mauryan society.

Since that moment I have always been in touch with Shelly. I am glad to say that my faith in him has proved to be correct. Since then he has grown and grown. He has become a major Sanskritist, Indologist.

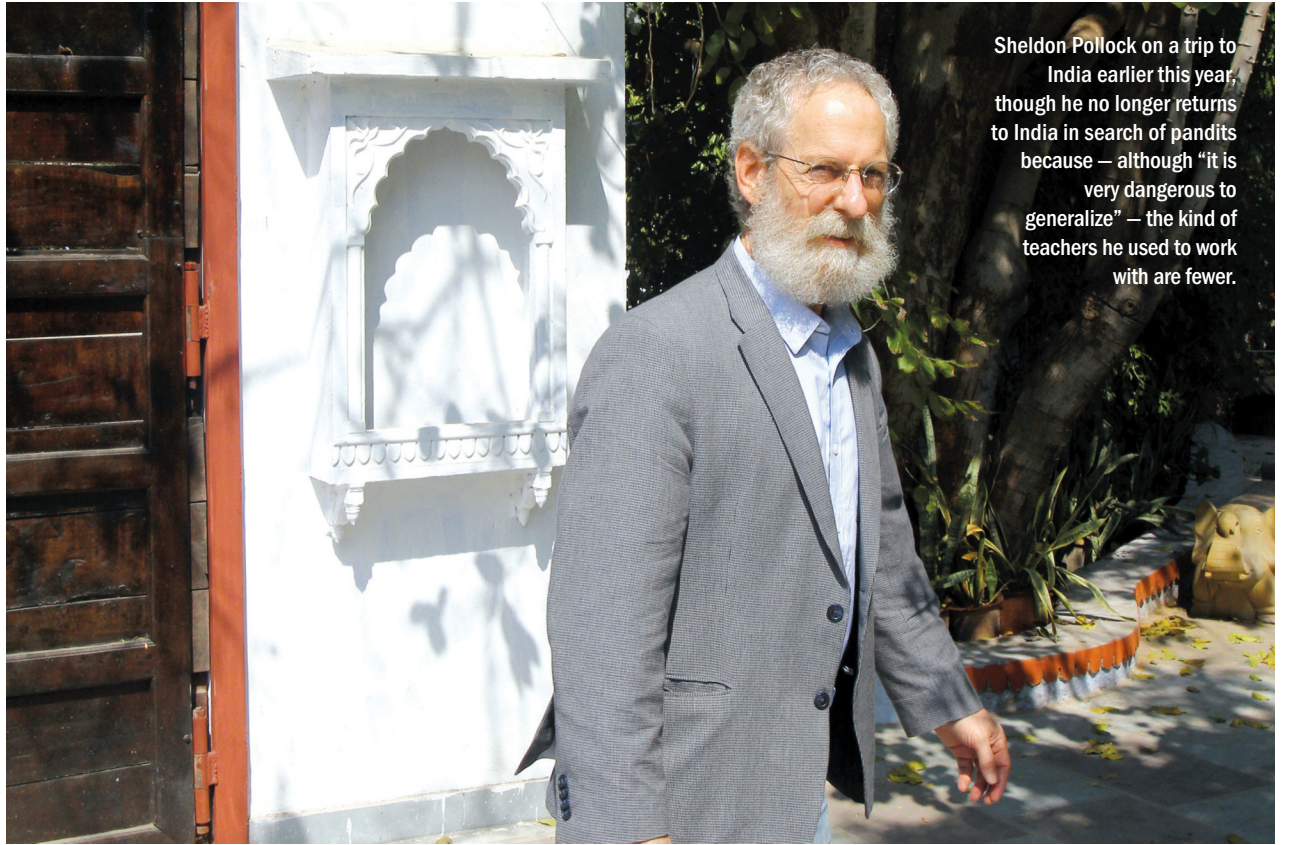
(*It was different in the days before people like Pollock*) a Sanskritist looked at Sanskrit. A Sanskritist looked at texts. A Sanskritist (*was not supposed to*) look at the society (*that produced the text*). I was drawn to Shelly for his (*type of*) analysis...

Milton Singer had built up this Department of South Asian studies at Chicago and they collected some of the best people there — A K Ramanujan and so on... What was so marvelous about the studies going on at that time (*there*) is that they meant something to us here in India. We read them, we didn’t just think that these are studies being done in America. We, sitting here, were added to the conversation with them.

Indological studies under Homi Bhabha (*the professor of language at Harvard*), under Gayatri Spivak (*the Indian literary theorist at Columbia*) became kind of a private language. They started speaking in a language completely unrelated to my experience.

Although they tried to relate it to India by going into Dalits, going into Buddhism or whatever Subaltern Studies, to me it was gibberish... That was kept as a circle keeping other people out and this is why it ceased to have any meaning to me... I am not here to run down the work done by Gayatri Spivak or Homi Bhabha. I am sure they have a meaningful discourse with their students. But unfortunately they mean nothing to those working on Indological studies in India...

Shelly has continually studied and explicated facts, details of history, of culture, of language, and how language has developed. His theory of how Sanskrit has developed, for instance, as a culture, rather than as a language, how it



Sheldon Pollock on a trip to India earlier this year, though he no longer returns to India in search of pandits because — although “it is very dangerous to generalize” — the kind of teachers he used to work with are fewer.

RAJESH KARKERA

spread from India eastwards, how it went to South East Asia. Mind-boggling.

It wasn’t just abstruse words strung together. He was concretely illustrating, taking examples — how the whole umbra and penumbra of Sanskrit culture spread.

In his book *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* he actually studied how, for instance, Kannada in the 7th century confronted Sanskrit as a court language — the *Kavirajamarga* text. He studied how it responded to the texts that were existing... He is brilliant.

I think that’s what a scholar should be doing. He should illuminate you. He should give you insight. Then you can react to it. You can argue with him. I have been continually been in touch with him for suggestions.

When I wrote a play called *The Fire and the Rain*, I wanted background material on Vedic India. He just (*took*) off — ‘Look at this article, look at that book, look at that translation.’ He is a great scholar, of course. This is the kind of thing that anyone in that department probably would have done, but he did it meaningfully. He could see what I was asking for and he got the context of it.

It was at that seminar (*in 1985, organized by the Department of South Asian studies at the University of Chicago*) that I read out my lecture on *Uttararamacharita*. He remembered it several years later when he translated his *Uttararamacharita*, the later history of Rama. He asked me to write the introduction. I said: “What should I do? He said: “Just write what you said. That’s enough.” And I did.

And, of course, the amount of practical work he has done in getting texts published through the Clay Library, which is where my introduction appeared. All the Sanskrit texts translated into English, these translations published...

It’s very rarely that you come across a foreign scholar who talks and then you suddenly see he is not a post-colonial or neo-colonial or whatever it is. He is talking to you and illuminating your background.

For Shelly, theory comes second.

He is always clear about what he is talking about — he states the facts, he gives you the background, he has gone and worked there... For *Kavirajamarga* he came to Mysore. He was here and worked with local scholars. He talked to me, talked to other Kannada writers about the *Kavirajmarga*. About what that one text meant...

The way he writes, you can feel his passion for it. It’s not enough for a scholar to be scholarly and there are enough Sanskrit scholars, whom I can mention who are scholarly but dull, but he is not.

I shouldn’t make these claims, but let me tell you that (*when*) he was given the Padma Shri (*one of India’s civilian awards*) by the government of India (*in 2010*). I fought for it. I proposed his name. Of course, it was not difficult. We got support... I fought for it and that shows how keenly I believed that he deserved that award as well the award that *India Abroad* is giving him. ■

As told to Vaihayasi Pande Daniel

‘He’s a great ambassador for India, its culture, its language, its heritage’

‘He is a well-respected scholar who has a definite sense of where he wants to go with things,’ says

Rohan Murty whose endowment inspired the Murty Classical Library of India

I read an article that Sheldon Pollock had written on the crisis in the humanities in India. He talked about how we are producing scores of engineers, lawyers and doctors, but most of us don’t study any of the humanities. We don’t have very good institutions dedicated to the humanities.

A common friend, Gurcharan Das, introduced us over e-mail. At that time Shelly was interested in possibly starting a series — a bilingual series — that would do translations for various Indian classics. Gurcharan told Shelly that you should talk to Rohan, he has a lot of interest in the same area. Maybe you guys will hit it off.

I was at that time a PhD student in computer science at Harvard, where I had accidentally befriended a professor in the Sanskrit department, Parimal Patil. I ended up taking several courses on philosophy in ancient India with Parimal. I independently arrived at a situation where I was very interested in how do we make some of the texts we were reading be more accessible to people like me who did not study these texts growing up.

My parents (*Infosys Co-founder N R Narayana Murthy and writer Sudha Murthy*) were visiting Cambridge, Boston. I called Shelly and said, “Why don’t we all meet?” We met, discussed this idea and we went from there to doing it in just a few weeks.

The work (*for the Murty Classical Library of India*) is all done by Professor Sheldon Pollock. He is the true scholar, the expert. We have a board of editors. He is the head of the board of editors. He was responsible for creating this board and deciding who should be on it. They ultimately decide which text they should translate or pick for translation, which one should be published and so on. They work closely with the Harvard University Press.

I probably spent a lot more time on this in the first two years, where I was involved in conceptualizing this whole effort. I was very interested in a lot of the details like why don’t we have a single family of fonts for all these classical Indian languages and why don’t we open source them so scholars can use them.

I feel all these texts should frankly be free. So why not create digital editions that we can give away, for free, if the endowment pays for it, because that will truly unlock these books? Our interactions were mainly limited to deciding the strategy, the look, the dos and don’ts for the series, but not in the scholarly aspects, because that is Sheldon Pollock’s domain almost entirely.

I was very clear from the beginning whatever I do with



Sheldon Pollock, left, with the Murty Classical Library Editorial Board.

COURTESY: ALLISON BUSCH

regard to this series must outlive me, otherwise it’s not sustainable. There is no point in doing this. Scholars who invest time and effort translating for the series must also believe that it will outlive all of them.

The Clay Library (*that translated ancient Sanskrit texts till it ran out of funding*), from what I understand, is a collection of 50 odd books, the original texts were in Sanskrit. Here we look at the old forms of various Indian languages. It’s not just Sanskrit, (*there are*) several other languages as well.

We are expected to launch in the spring of 2015. I hope we stick to that schedule. If we do, then I think starting 2015 every year we should have four to five volumes coming out.

What we are trying to do is not an easy task. It’s complex because we are not just saying one or two languages. We are saying several languages. There is a lot of diversity there. For most of these (*languages*) there are no standard fonts. We had to create fonts for these things.

Doing a project of this magnitude — at least of this vision — with regard to India is something new, something that’s certainly new for Harvard. It has taken Harvard some time to kind of slowly get its head around (*to the fact*) that India is not one country with one language.

Sheldon Pollock’s argument was that if you say classical languages of India, it’s beyond just Sanskrit. Sanskrit is important, of course. But he said: “Look, take your own mother tongue (*Kannada*), there is a classical form of your

mother tongue.”

I was mainly thinking of Sanskrit, but Shelly Pollock said, “You can do so much more than just that.”

He is such a well-respected scholar that more often than not he has a definite sense of where he wants to go with things. He is a very approachable person. He is somebody with whom you can disagree. He and I have disagreed a lot. At the same time... in spite of all of this, at the end of the day, we sort of work on this large project together and make things happen.

The first time I met him, he recited an old Kannada *shloka*. It was very nice to hear somebody from a different country and culture be able to speak an old form of my mother tongue.

When I got married, he came to India for the wedding. Several people were very fascinated. They had all heard of him, of course, and they were fascinated that he was there. He was, of course, very plugged into everything in terms of culture and language and so on.

Whenever I have spoken to him I find he has such depth and gravitas and an incredible expanse of knowledge of India, of its past, of its culture, of its history, of Sanskrit, of various languages.

He is a phenomenal friend of India, a great ambassador for India, its culture, its language and its heritage. So I am very happy you are recognizing him as a Friend of India. ■

As told to Vaihayasi Pande Daniel