

“King David in Oudh: a Bible story in Sanskrit and the Just King at an Afghan court”

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Preamble: Sanskrit’s Place at Oxford – an Academic Topography

As part of his inaugural lecture in 1977, my distinguished predecessor, Richard Gombrich, provided a history of Oxford’s Sanskrit professorship. We know from his archival investigations that the chair was established by the university in 1827, in response to a munificent bequest from the estate of Joseph Boden. Colonel Boden had drawn up his will in 1811, not long after returning from India, where he had served for twenty-five years in the Bombay native infantry.

Horace Hayman Wilson was elected the first Boden professor in 1832. Fifty years later, in 1882, the college affiliation of the professorship was captured by Balliol, when that college was at the height of its imperial ambitions, under its master Benjamin Jowett; and it is with that venerable college that the chair’s affiliation remains to this day.

During interviews for fellowships at Balliol, it is not uncommon for applicants to be confronted with the following question: as a fellow of this college, you might find yourself at a meal sitting next to the professor of Sanskrit. What would you talk about?

Of course, the purpose of the question is to probe the ability of candidates to function successfully in a collegiate setting, in which they will have to make intelligent conversation with people who work on subjects very different from their own. The mention of Sanskrit is shorthand for what is out of the ordinary and stands at some intellectual remove. For this purpose, it is not that Sanskrit study is far from some subjects and close to others. For it is not that any candidate is expected to *know* something about Sanskrit. The topic of Sanskrit is assumed, rather, to be similarly dislocated from all customary intellectual pursuits, positioned, as it were, in the academic world’s realm of imaginary numbers.

Thinking of something to talk about with the professor of Sanskrit therefore serves as the college’s shibboleth, successful conversation with any other fellow being assured, according to this reasoning, *a fortiori*.

Balliol’s interviewers assume, no doubt with justification, that candidates will not have given thought to the connection of Sanskrit with their own interests. And yet what they do not tell the anxious candidates is that, should they one day find themselves confronted with the predicted placement at table, this should be no occasion for despair. *They* might never have attempted to scale the sheer face of such an apparently steep conversational cliff. But *Sanskritists*, as part of their experience of living in the world, have had a good deal of practice explaining themselves.

Indeed, the student of Sanskrit in Europe or the Americas begins to learn, almost as if it were assigned with the memorization of the first noun declension, how to talk about the choice of study, in response to questions: how did we become interested in the subject? Were there very many other students? How many professors of Sanskrit were there in the world, and where in the world were they? What did our parents think about our choice of subject?

Questions of this sort are eminently reasonable ones to ask. And so they are asked rather often. Through regular practice, therefore, every student of Sanskrit has evolved a fashion of explaining the subject, and the choice of it. Most of us have converged on a similar approach. We will locate Sanskrit in space and time. In

space, we will say, Sanskrit served as the culturally pre-eminent learned language of the Indian subcontinent, and at certain moments in its history, Sanskrit played this role in parts of central Asia, and in parts of the mainland and islands of Southeast Asia as well.

In the present, we will say, Sanskrit continues to be a mode of religious practice and doctrinal discourse everywhere. It is in use daily, by tens of millions of people who consider themselves Buddhists or Hindus, when they recite prayers or perform ceremonies, or employ others to do so for them, or when they meditate. This daily use of Sanskrit has gone on, with many changes and through many vicissitudes, for twenty-five centuries, at least.

In the past, we will say, Sanskrit served as the medium for an extensive literary and dramatic culture, the aesthetic ideals of which exerted a commanding influence on literatures in the other languages of South Asia. They continue to exert a far from negligible influence today.

As a language of learning, we will say, Sanskrit was for more than a thousand years both the medium for, and the constitutive epistemology of, a vast complex of political and intellectual cultures. There was a formidable array of Sanskritic arts and sciences: logic, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, astronomy, hermeneutics, aesthetics, moral, legal, and political discourse, and so on. The texts of these disciplines still survive in manuscript form, in unimaginably large numbers. Given their numbers, many of the manuscripts have yet to be studied, or edited, or even catalogued, despite the best efforts of modern scholars to date.

These were knowledge systems that were produced in dizzying textual depth. They are at times conceptually brilliant or fiercely polemical, in places oppressively learned. And lately they are all almost entirely unknown outside the field of specialists, for all their interest and merit and value, in the larger academic world, much less in the world at large.

All of this is what we would say, were we to be asked the usual reasonable questions about our subject. From these answers would then emerge the explanations for our *choice* of subject.

But lurking behind the reasonable and polite questions that we do hear, are some rather more direct ones that we do not. One such question, in its simplest form, is this: what is the study of Sanskrit for?

What is the Study of Sanskrit For?

No doubt this question often arises in sensible minds; but it is rarely asked aloud. Although it might seem rude to do so, the question is worth asking; but it is worth asking in a modulated form, a form that does not sound quite so narrow-minded. Instead of asking what the study of Sanskrit *is* for, why not ask what the study of Sanskrit *should* be for? And if it would not be too parochial to rephrase the question with a local relevance, why not ask, what should the study of Sanskrit *at Oxford* be for?

Such a question would be worth attempting to answer. Not because we imagine it to be asked in the utilitarian spirit, which we in answering would thereby endorse, asked by some dreaded spectre of management, the question a rhetorical shadow cast by the upraised budgetary axe,

but rather because it is occasionally worthwhile for specialists in a field to reconsider their discipline on its own intellectual terms, and to find a way to articulate how it forms part of the vision of the university as a whole, and what that *university* should be for. In this spirit it is not a question to be asked only of those who study Sanskrit.

How, then, shall we go about answering this question of purpose? Those of us who work on historical subjects might suggest that to begin, we must find out how Sanskrit came to occupy its imaginary location in the terrain of academic knowledge.

To go about it empirically, we might start by asking what the study of Sanskrit at Oxford was for, when the professorship began. That is a history that begins with the donor.

What Was the Study of Sanskrit at Oxford For?

In drawing up his will, Col. Boden followed a practice that continues to exasperate the leaders of universities even today. For he specified not just the subject of the professorship that he wished to endow, but also its purpose. The words of the bequest are inscribed in Trinity Church in Cheltenham, where Boden's daughter Elizabeth is buried. Boden had intended the bulk of his estate to support Elizabeth for the duration of her life, but poor Elizabeth died young, at nineteen, and the executors of the estate put up a plaque to record Col. Boden's wishes concerning the disposition of the estate after her death. In Cheltenham, then, we can read what Col. Boden intended for the professorship. He said that he was:

“of the opinion that a more general and critical knowledge of [Sanskrit] will be a means of enabling my Countrymen to proceed in the Conversion of the Natives of India to the Christian Religion, by disseminating a knowledge of the Sacred Scriptures amongst them more effectually than all other means whatsoever.”

Thus Col. Boden expressed a triple intention with respect to the professorship, organized in a causal chain: It was to promote the general and critical knowledge of Sanskrit, which would facilitate the translation and dissemination of the Sacred Scriptures, that is to say, the Christian Bible. In turn, the translation of the scriptures into Sanskrit would be the most effective means of conversion of the 'natives' of India to Christianity, of the Anglican variety.

Several questions arise about this triple intention and the logic of its causal links. First, was this use of his estate Col. Boden's own idea? If so, it would have been an unusual one for a man whose career had been spent in the army in India in the 1780s and '90s. At that time, Christian missionaries were prevented from entering the domains of the East India Company, as a matter of Company policy. Conversion was not what the Company was in India for in those days, nor was conversion of "natives" what most military officers serving there had in mind.

A more important question is: Why should a man who had lived in India for 25 years have thought that a *Sanskrit* Bible would be the most effectual means of conversion? Most so-called 'natives' alive in India in those days did not know Sanskrit.

The reasoning seems to have been that if one could convert the elite and educated classes, the rest of the country would follow. A similar principle had been adopted by the Jesuits, who had operated in South India in the seventeenth century, studying Sanskrit and writing Sanskrit treatises which had the aim of Christian conversion. The Jesuits' Sanskrit strategy did not prove successful in promoting large numbers of conversions, however; something that they were eventually willing to acknowledge.

So to return to the question, were the Indian elites really likely to become Anglican Christians by reading a *Sanskrit* Bible, of all texts?

Sir William Jones thought not. Jones, a graduate of this university, and the founder of the Asiatick Society in Calcutta in 1784, was an early British advocate for the study of Sanskrit. Jones judged that the conversion of Hindus to Christianity was not likely.

Hindus could accept the truth of the Bible's miracles, he thought, as what they would expect of divine beings; and they could accept the Christian teachings, as being like teachings that they knew. But they would not see anything uniquely compelling in them. The One God takes many forms, and is appropriately worshipped in many ways, including Hindu ones, they would say.

Translation of a few prophetic passages of the Bible might "in due time" persuade a few learned Hindus, Jones thought, but this must be left to their own reasoned judgment. In any case, this was not what the study of Sanskrit should be for.

Jones was the most prominent articulator in his day of a universalizing Enlightenment ideal, believing that the study of the cultural artefacts of ancient civilizations, and especially of India's ancient civilization, could provide instruction and edification for modern people. At the same time, he argued that it would be in the interests of good government in India for British rulers to understand the culture of those whom they ruled, and to govern as much as possible through pre-existent cultural forms.

This combination of purposes - Oriental enlightenment and cultural curiosity in the service of government - was the signature feature of the movement properly called Orientalism, which gathered momentum among British and European intellectuals in the early nineteenth century.

Col. Boden's desires for the translation of the Bible into Sanskrit were at cross-purposes with the desires of Jones and the Orientalists. Through the course of the nineteenth century, the interests of conversion on the one hand, and of Oriental enlightenment and governance on the other, competed for influence over public attitudes toward India, in Britain generally, and at Oxford in particular. Indeed, this competition was expressed in concrete terms in the two elections of the Boden professor that took place during that century.

The Nineteenth Century Elections

When Boden had drawn up his will in 1811, there would not have been great support for his proselytizing goals among old India hands or among the makers of the British Government's India policy. But by 1830, when the first election to the chair took place, the climate had changed.

Against the supporters of Orientalist and liberal approaches to the British involvement with India, there had by then arisen support for aggressively Utilitarian and Anglicist approaches, which aimed at modernizing reform in India, and at supporting Indian education, not in the literary monuments of ancient Indian high culture through the medium of Sanskrit, but in the modern European arts and sciences through the medium of English.

The Anglicist pressures were an outgrowth of Evangelist ones. The Evangelists called for opening up India to Christian missionaries, who in turn were to promote Christianity as the instrument of a reforming, scientifically modern, and distinctively British way of life. Already in 1813 the British Government had been compelled to allow missionaries to operate in India. In 1835 the Anglicist educational curriculum was established for British educational institutions in India. Under this Anglicist policy, the study of Sanskrit would be useful only for *transmitting* cultural messages, not for receiving them.

The arguments of the Orientalists lost ground. Collected in a few weakly supported centers of Orientalist learning, they tended in their reaction to the new policies to an exilic rhetoric of reproach.

Nevertheless, it was H.H. Wilson, the Orientalist candidate and inheritor of William Jones' mantle, who won the first election as Boden professor by a slim margin, over an Anglicist candidate who had campaigned on a platform of Bible translation. Oxford's Convocation constituted the electoral board in those days. In the end, it seems, a bare majority of Convocation was unable to ignore the fact that Wilson knew Sanskrit language and literature incomparably well, even though his detractors had accused him of having once kept an Indian concubine, and what was worse, of being, on the subject of Sanskrit, positively enthusiastic.

The next election went the other way. This one took place in 1860, just two years after the suppression of the Indian Uprising or Sepoy Mutiny. Feeling in Britain, as in British India, had in that moment hardened against enthusiasm for things Indian or for Oriental enlightenments. Monier Williams, who in his campaign for the chair had made noises about scriptural translation and conversion, defeated Max Müller, the most visible proponent in mid-century of a deeply Romantic version of the Orientalist project, but a liberal Lutheran, and what was worse, a German.

Neither Boden professor of the nineteenth century devoted a great deal of time to Bible translation, much less to conversion. With or without their efforts, as it turned out, there was little conversion to Christianity in India along the intended lines. William Jones had been right.

Vanishing Purposes

Perhaps this was finally noticed. After the university's reforms in 1881, Col. Boden's intentions concerning the chair, which had never been made part of the university's regulations, but which had been regularly invoked during the first two elections, were no longer brought up.

On the other hand, the Orientalists' Indophile project also faded from view by the end of the century, overtaken by Britain's flood tide of High Imperialism. During this later period, the purpose of the study of Sanskrit and other Indian languages at Oxford was chiefly a practical one: to train probationary officers for the Indian Civil Service.

In broader terms, the study of Sanskrit at Oxford by the end of the century could tend to serve the purpose of unfavourable comparison. It contributed to a way of knowing the subject people of the subcontinent as members of a society in ruins, as a degraded race, even, who had fallen away from the proper knowledge of their own classics, but whose own classics, for that matter, did not hold up well in comparison with European ones.

So that is the history. In its beginnings, the study of Sanskrit at Oxford was attached to several purposes which were at odds with one another, though all were linked to Britain's involvement in India. Indeed, because of this linkage, the Sanskrit chair was in those days the most highly paid chair at Oxford. And elections to the chair were matters of public controversy, troubling the counsels of the mighty, provoking questions in Parliament.

How times change, and political purposes shift. The Queen Empress made guarantees to the Indian people. Her government in India would no longer permit missionaries to interfere unchecked in the practice of their religion. Meanwhile, the Orientalist cause, in all its romanticism about the transformative virtues of the ancient past, was lost. The retrieval of Sanskrit classics was no longer to be the high road to good government in India. Even the promotion of the exaggerated self-confidence necessary for Britain's High Imperial mission eventually flagged.

When the political purposes on which Sanskrit study depended for its obvious relevance vanished, that study drifted into its peculiar location in the academic topography. And yet, attitudes toward things Indian which were embedded in those

vanished purposes lived on in the study of India. They are still strewn across the intellectual landscape of Indian studies today.

Disinterested Scholarship?

But what of the dedicated students of Sanskrit in this long story? Surely not every scholar of the subject readily accepted its enslavement to governmental purposes. Especially not at Oxford, which has never had the reputation of following the trends that are set in London, or elsewhere in the world.

Nevertheless, even for genuine enthusiasts of the study of Sanskrit, disinterested scholarship was not easy to achieve, given the pre-conditions under which the discipline had taken shape. There had been an even deeper history at work.

That is, the fortunes of the study of Sanskrit, and its enslavement to political purposes in the nineteenth century, were not accidental. They were in part an outgrowth of what the cultural politics of Sanskrit had been in its own time and place. For the Sanskrit knowledge systems had conceived of Sanskrit as something exceptional among languages.

The premiere Sanskritic disciplines were sciences of language: grammar and linguistics, hermeneutics and interpretation, rhetoric and literary aesthetics. Sanskrit intellectuals working in these disciplines had developed the view that Sanskrit was the only language in which higher forms of reason could be transacted, or powerful thoughts expressed. Over the other languages of South Asia, both vernacular and cosmopolitan, they claimed for Sanskrit a supremacy. And this claim of Sanskrit's almost transcendent authority, though regularly challenged, proved durably successful in many cultural settings on the subcontinent.

Not surprisingly, modern European scholars were fascinated by Sanskrit's claim to be so powerful and so powerfully communicative, but they were also alarmed by it. Hence they were confronted with a quandary.

If they were to accept that Sanskrit was an exceptional instrument of knowledge, it would follow that any one of them who could attain proficiency in its formidably difficult disciplines would be imbued with the lustre of their pre-eminent glamour.

But if modern scholars sought the distinction that knowing Sanskrit conferred, they also sought to contain Sanskrit's claim of special authority. This is because they recognized that if they accepted that claim, it would put them into a rivalry with the language's traditionally trained, hereditary "native" experts, the Brahmins; and also because they recognized that the claim was difficult to dissociate from the implication of a Brahminical vision of political and social order, a regime of things that was distinctly unmodern.

Modern scholars, then, sought a method for containing Sanskrit's potential to activate its cultural politics, by subjecting the study of Sanskrit to scholarly protocols which were antithetical to the language's genius and charisma. They opted for a decidedly unromantic array of curatorial and antiquarian forms of scholarship: philologizing, cataloguing, typologizing, organizing into chronologies, and so on; eminently useful practices, no doubt, but none of them glamorous.

All of this is not to say that the purposes of Sanskrit study must inevitably be entangled in the imperatives of power or of rivalry. After all, there are evident, internal reasons to pursue the study of Sanskrit, not just cynical, instrumental ones.

All of this is to say, rather, that in the past, dedicated modern scholars of Sanskrit have found themselves confronting a paradoxical situation, a landscape littered with

the wreckage of past purposes, and with the half-buried ruins of obdurate attitudes. This has been a landscape that could trap the study of Sanskrit between seeming the most dull and obscure of subjects, and being the cause of the most violent emotions and atavistic vehemence.

What is the way forward?

What then is possible? Is there a way forward? How can we avoid the hazards which have constrained students of Sanskrit in the past? The answer, I would suggest, lies in the changed circumstances in which we now live. Since 1977, when my predecessor gave his inaugural lecture, a revolution has taken place in the study of Indian history. This revolution has had implications for the study of Sanskrit. It presents students of Sanskrit with a possibility: that we can now recognize the limitations of some past assumptions.

One such limitation, as it turns out, was created by committing ourselves to the civilization as our guiding analytic category.

The idea of the civilization had always been the friend of the enlightened student of world history. To posit the existence of civilizations was to make possible an open-minded, inclusive, comparative perspective on our own culture's history and its role in the world.

And yet it turns out that, for all the virtues of the civilizational idea, there are drawbacks as well. For the idea of the civilization to do its work for us, it seems almost unavoidable to assume that civilizations are clearly and permanently differentiated; that they are self-contained, and pre-exist their contact with other civilizations. [In short, that they have essential natures.]

This feature of the civilizational idea has guided the writing of the world's history in the direction of narratives of Civilizational Clash, of aggression and defeat, of invasion and rejection. We need not look far today to encounter the dangers that result from this sort of historical thinking. And the greatest danger is that it is erroneous.

To be more specific, the acceptance of the civilizational idea has guided the study of the ancient history of South Asia toward the narrative of a self-contained, essentially unchanging Indian Civilization, which was distinguished by its religious forms, and which resisted or absorbed alien incursions with greater or lesser success. But this leaves out an important part of the story, the most interesting part, I would suggest.

It leaves out the composite character and dynamism of the South Asian cultural world; it leaves out the possibility of individual intellectuals who thought and acted and vied with one another; and it leaves out cultural flows and contacts between regions of the world, and the mutually created changes that ensued.

If, in the study of Sanskrit, we were to set aside the Civilizational idea as our guiding principle, we could account more competently for the history of the uses of Sanskrit that took place in conjunction with knowledge traditions expressed in other languages, in the Indian vernacular languages and, in the second millennium, in Arabic and Persian especially.

The Bible in Sanskrit

What could I mean by this? As an example let us turn back to the topic with which we began, the Bible in Sanskrit.

You will recall that Col. Boden and the Evangelists had hoped to translate the Bible into Sanskrit and other Indian languages, as a means of facilitating conversion to Christianity.

What was ignored in the Biblical translation plan was the fact that there had been Christians and Jews in South Asia since the early centuries of the Common Era . Stories from the Bible, and their related teachings, had already been propagated in India by Jews, Christians and Muslims, for many centuries. Some of these stories were even told in Sanskrit. Let me choose one example, a rather less well-known one, the stories of David and Solomon, the Kings of Israel, but also the Muslim Prophets, as their stories were told in Sanskrit, some 500 years ago.

The Sulaimaccaritra

The text at hand is called the Sulaimaccaritra, the Life of Sulaymān. It was edited and published by the indefatigable South Indian scholar, V. Raghavan, in 1973. It consists of 563 verses, in four chapters. Three chapters are concerned with events in the life of David, while the fourth chapter is about Solomon.

The opening of the text describes the circumstances under which it was composed. The Life of Sulaymān was commissioned by a prince called Lāḍkhān, the son of an Ahmad Khān. Lāḍkhān and Ahmad Khān were members of the Lodi ruling family. Originally Afghanis, the Lodis controlled much of North India in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. We know from various contemporary sources that Ahmad Khān was the administrator of the region of Oudh, also called Avadh, or in Sanskrit Ayodhyā, around the year 1500 of the common era. He was probably based in the city of Lucknow.

Lāḍkhān encouraged the presence of Sanskrit authors and Hindu religious philosophers in his court, as did other Muslim rulers of this period. The most successful Sanskrit author whom he patronized was Kalyāṇa Malla. We are told at the beginning of the Life of Sulaymān that Lāḍkhān had previously commissioned from Kalyāṇa a work called the Anaṅgaraṅga, or the Theater of Love. This was a very well received work indeed; more on its contents later.

We are told further that one day, as they were sitting in his court, Lāḍkhān, still savoring the success of Kalyāṇa Malla's earlier work, asked the poet now to tell the story of Sulaymān, a king born in a foreign race, who was the very embodiment of wisdom, and to tell the story of his father Dāvūdu as well. Kalyāṇa was asked, furthermore, to tell that wonderful story in the girvāṇa-bhāṣā, the language of the gods, that is, in Sanskrit.

Now, why should Lāḍkhān have asked for the story to be told in Sanskrit? Lodi princes would have used a refined form of Persian at their courts.

It appears that the purpose was something that we might today call humanistic and secular. First let us look more closely at the text.

King Dāvūdu

The first three chapters of the Sulaimaccaritra are concerned with the events in King David's life which led up to the birth of Solomon. In particular they are concerned with the part of the story in which David seduced Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Of course, this was a low point in David's moral life, from which he, and the children of Israel, were expected to learn a memorable lesson.

Most features of the Biblical version of the story are also found in the Sanskrit one. It was a time of war, the Sanskrit story goes, and David's general, Joab, was already at the battle front. But David tarried in the capitol city. One day, from the roof of his palace, he saw a beautiful woman bathing on the roof of her house, and he was

overcome with desire. She was Bathsheba. Her husband was away with the army. In the Bible, the story that follows is rather brief: David desired her, inquired about her, lay with her; and she became pregnant. All of this requires only three verses to narrate in the Second Book of Samuel.

In the Sulaimac-caritra, on the other hand, we hear at some length about the seduction: how David was smitten, and pined away inconsolably for Bathsheba. How one of his wives found out from him the cause of his distress, and volunteered to serve as go-between and persuader. How Bathsheba, when approached, refused indignantly. How other women folk assisted in the seduction. [How Bathsheba was given a tour of the royal mansions, and] how, to overwhelm her, David behaved in a way that some might call admirably bold and manly, but that others would call shameless and disgraceful. There was the use of love spells and amulets, of potions and philtres, possibly of strong narcotics. Things then went on between David and Bathsheba for some time.

When David learned that Bathsheba had become pregnant, and that there would be no way to make her husband believe that the child was his, he sent a message to Joab at the front, specifying that Bathsheba's husband should be placed in the vanguard of the battle. And there he was killed.

David remained untroubled by what he had done, until a sage came to David, and told him a story. The story was of a wealthy prince and a lowly servant, the latter of whom had found a straggling fawn in the forest, which he adopted and raised as his beloved pet. One day the wealthy prince, although he had more than enough cattle and game of his own, carried the poor man's fawn away, to cook and to serve as the main course for a feast that he wished to offer his guests.

When the sage pointed out to David that he had done something even more unjust than the prince in this story, David asked the sage how to atone, and was told that the life of his new son by Bathsheba was forfeit.

After the death of the son, David nevertheless put on a celebration, provoking the dismay of his courtiers, who asked him why he was not grieving. In reply, David delivered a philosophical discourse, about the nature of the human soul and its immortality, in a style that is reminiscent of the Bhagavad Gītā, the most well-known Sanskrit text in the modern world.

Later, when these upheavals had passed, David and Bathsheba returned to life together, and eventually another son was born to them. This was Solomon, to whom was given the right of royal succession.

Curious Features

The story of David in Sanskrit has something puzzling about it. It includes features that are specific to the Biblical version. It is clear, however, from the setting in which the story is told, at the Persian-speaking court of a Muslim ruler, that the sources for Kalyāṇa's story must have been Persian and Arabic versions.

These versions would have been found in the qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā', the Arabic digests of the lives of the Muslim prophets, which included lives of David and Solomon. An extensive and productive literature in both Arabic and Persian, the qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' were circulated widely in the Muslim world, and were current in India in the days of the Lodis. David and Solomon are known in that literature by the Quranic form of their names - Daūd and Sulaymān. These are the names by which they are known in our Sanskrit text as well.

And yet, not all of the features of our Sanskrit story can be found in the Arabic and Persian literature. The rendering of Bathsheba's name into Sanskrit as Saptasūtā, the

‘daughter of seven’, must be a Sanskrit rendering of Hebrew Bathsheba, which assumes a folk etymology of that name. No such etymology of this name is attempted in the Arabic or Persian versions.

A more striking example is David’s celebration after the death of his son, and the dismay of his courtiers at this celebration. In the Bible also, after the death of Bathsheba’s son, David did not fast but took a meal, to the surprise of his servants. There too, David explained himself, philosophically. This part of the story is unknown in the Arabic or Persian versions of the David story.

So this is the puzzle. How could specifically Biblical features of the story of David, features which were not in the Arabic and Persian lore about the prophets, have turned up in Lucknow in 1500?

[We know that there were communities of Jews who lived in India then, but almost all of them lived on the West side of the subcontinent, not in Oudh. There was, however, a caste group in Oudh called Qidwā’is, who are mentioned in Persian texts as early as the seventeenth century, and called Banī Isrā’īl, children of Israel. They might have been Jews who had been converted to Islam, at least officially. Perhaps they retained something of the Bible stories of David. But we have no evidence of their appearance in Lodi courts.]

The question of sources will have to remain unsolved for now. In any case, the Sanskrit Life of Sulaymān is not exclusively Jewish in its sources, as we shall see when we come to the chapter about Solomon. It is clear that the composition of the story was achieved by a blending of materials, not by a simple transposition from one specific religious tradition into another.

Other features of the story, on the other hand, are unique to our Sanskrit text, and are found in no pre-existent source. The story has been given a distinctly Sanskritic viewpoint. For example, the main characters are called mlecchas, that is, aliens, who speak barbarous languages, while Sanskrit is the language of the gods. The story is set at the beginning of the last and worst of the Brahminical cosmological ages, the Kaliyuga.

Furthermore, the story has been related using Sanskritic narrative conventions. Instead of the Bible’s poor man and his sheep, there is a śaudraka and his fawn. Instead of the prophet Nathan, there is an ascetic sage who lives in an āśrama. This sage, by the way, had pronounced a curse on David long ago, something that David was not aware of, but which had been the cause of his problems in the first place. Such curses were a preferred plot device among Sanskrit story-tellers.

Śṛṅgāra in Jerusalem

The most distinctive feature of the Sanskrit text, however, is its attention to the erotic side of the story of David and Bathsheba. What the Bible did not tell us about David’s seduction of the wife of Uriah is described in considerable detail in the Sanskrit text, and there is a reason for this.

As I mentioned earlier, our author, Kalyāṇa Malla, was more celebrated for a work called the Anaṅgaraṅga, the Theatre of Love. This was a text in the literary tradition of the Kāmasūtra, the *second* most famous text in Sanskrit in the modern world.

The Anaṅgaraṅga was celebrated for its exposition of the erotic arts and sciences. It was copied and recopied many times. It circulated widely in the Sanskrit readership in ensuing centuries, far beyond the reach of the Lodi courts. It is in print in dozens of editions today, and in dozens of translations.

Therefore, while the Bible tells us rather briefly that David desired Bathsheba, and lay with her, the Sulaimac-caritra tells us rather beautifully and in great detail, just how David desired her, and what it was about her that was so desirable, and the many ways in which the two of them lay with each other.

So rich and lush is the language of erotic attraction, seduction and enjoyment in the Sulaimac-caritra, that it works at cross-purposes with the moral instruction explicitly stated elsewhere in the work. The narrator's comments and warnings, and the reproaches of the sage who takes the role of Nathan, are expressed in the simplest or śloka Sanskrit meter.

But for the description of what Bathsheba looked like and how she walked and spoke, and what David felt about that, and what the two of them did when they were finally alone, the poem shifts over to sonorous, complex meters, and a rich and lavish poetic language, a language that was the product of more than a thousand years of careful refinement and enhancement by the Sanskrit poets.

I suppose that this is what Lāḍkhān had in mind when he requested Kalyāṇa Malla to tell the story of David in Sanskrit, given that language's special powers of expressing an aesthetic of love in fulfilment.

Shared Courtly Culture

But there is more to the use of Sanskrit here. For if the purpose of the Life of Sulaymān is to see the story of an errant foreign king from a Sanskritic point of view, it is also to make of the story something culturally shared. That is why it was interesting for the story to be about David in particular, an archetypally wise and pious king, one beloved of God, but one born, from the Sanskritic viewpoint, in a family of foreigners, and, at least briefly, a sinner in the exercise of his power.

Kalyāṇa Malla's Sanskritic version of the David story would have been valued for making the erotic dimension of the story especially compelling, and thereby heightening the moral tensions in the story of the love of a king for a woman he should not have.

In this way, Lāḍkhān requested the telling of a story that raises, in Sanskrit, the problem of alien kings, and of their power.

The Lodis, though by confession Muslims, were rulers of a domain that was mostly non-Muslim. Like other Indo-Muslim rulers of their period, they sought an alternative to attempting to govern by Shari'a law. As part of this alternative, the Lodis instituted a quasi-secular courtly culture. They drew together at court men of many backgrounds, including Sanskritic and Hindu ones, and sought to produce a distinctive, non-religious, shared culture for nobles and courtiers, who were to be united in a code of service to the ruler, and united in a code of manly self-cultivation.

Part of manly self-cultivation would have had to do with discipline in sexual conduct, that is, with following an ethic of healthy enjoyment, but also of healthy self-regulation. The study of scientific, ethical, and medical treatises in Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit served the formulation of this ethic.

In this courtly context, the ruler was to be the model for all men, but greater than them. The king must have more wives than others, for the sake of heirs. And it was fitting for him to enjoy loving his wives, but it was also manly for him to be measured and reasonable about his enjoyment, and not to do wrong. This, then, is part of the interest of the story of David. David has not done right. Power has blinded him exactly here.

Chapter Four: Solomon the Mage

If David was wise and powerful, and for the most part just, Solomon was even more so. In Hebrew literature after the Bible, and in Arabic literature as well, Solomon was depicted as the ultimate master of esoteric learning, lore and craft. Beloved of God, he was given a ring, on which was inscribed the most powerful name of the deity.

Solomon's ring gave him power over all creatures, including the Jinns or Genies. Those Jinns who refused his bidding Solomon imprisoned in small containers: in bottles, jars, or boxes, and, sealing the containers with the imprint of his ring, cast them into the sea.

The fourth chapter of the Life of Sulaymān begins with some of these facts about Solomon. It then turns abruptly to the story of a fisherman, who one day, cast his net into the sea, only to pull out nothing but a small box, which was sealed with the ring of Solomon. When the fisherman opened the box, a cloud of smoke poured out, and from the midst of this cloud appeared a Rākṣasa, that is, a demon.

The Rākṣasa, when he discovered that it was not Solomon, but only a fisherman who had freed him, began to threaten that fisherman with death. The fisherman, however, began a discussion, asking the demon whether he had really been imprisoned in this box, or had come at that moment from somewhere else. Eventually the demon felt obliged to demonstrate that he really could fit inside such a small box. Once the demon was back inside, the fisherman resealed the box and made to cast it back into the ocean.

When the demon begged to be released again, the fisherman pointed out that he could not trust the demon, and that he found himself in a difficult position, one very similar to the position of that physician who had cured a king of his illness, only to be killed by him. What was the story of that physician, asked the demon, and the fisherman proceeded to tell it.

And indeed, the Life of Sulaymān continues with the story of the ungrateful king and his physician. In that tale, the ungrateful king tells another, about a trusting king who had two wives, and how the second wife tried to seduce the youthful son of the first. In that tale, in turn, the trusting king's minister tells the story of a merchant and his parrot, which tried to inform its master that his wife was unfaithful, and how that parrot was killed for its troubles.

The fisherman's story then goes on with a tale of magical fish taken from a distant lake, and with the story of an enchanted prince who lay paralyzed in a bewitched and silent city, and how that prince was cured.

In short, the fourth chapter of the Life of Sulaymān is of a very different nature from the first three chapters. Its source is neither the Bible, nor the Arabic Lives of the Prophets, but another Arabic work, the *Alf Layla wa Layl*, that is, the Arabian Nights, though Kalyāṇa Malla does not say so.

To be more specific, this is the story of the Fisherman and the 'Ifrit, which comes near the beginning, covering the third to ninth nights in Scheherazade's long narrative. It appears in the Sanskrit in nearly complete detail, though with one of the sub-stories missing, and one replaced from elsewhere in the Nights.

As far as we know, the Life of Sulaymān is the only rendering of any part of the Arabian Nights into Sanskrit. This is surprising, given the great enthusiasm for story material of this sort in India. Indeed, many stories of the Arabian Nights had found their way into that collection from beginnings long before in Sanskrit sources.

But why should this tale be told as a Life of Sulaymān? When the story of the Fisherman and the 'Ifrīt ends, so does the Sulaimac-caritra.

The most obvious connection with Solomon is the seal on the box that imprisoned the Demon. Solomon has, as it were, left his imprint on the Arabian Nights as a whole, for many of its stories depend on the escape of a Jinn whom he had imprisoned long in the past. Furthermore, there is a way in which the princes in this story are reflected images of Solomon, the Just King.

But perhaps Kalyāṇa thought that this passage from the Arabian Nights simply provided a better story than any of the lore of Solomon did. Or perhaps the use of this story indicates the wider audience for the Life of Sulaymān, that is, its re-performance in settings other than Lāḍkhān's court.

Our sources tell us that Kalyāṇa Malla, the author of the Life of Sulaymān, was a ruler in his own right. At his own court he was, furthermore, the patron of Sanskrit poets. The Sulaimac-caritra must certainly have been performed there, and probably in other settings as well. The Lodis were not alone in their interest in promoting a quasi-secular shared culture at court. By imitation, this became a pervasive cultural principle of the era. It was greatly developed and promulgated by the Mughals, who succeeded the Lodis in power in Delhi in the sixteenth century.

The Point of Telling the Story

I fear that by now some members of the audience must be shaking their heads in dismay. 'Dear oh dear,' they must be thinking, 'this is just what we feared that Sanskritists spent their time doing – studying sexual positions from the Kamasutra or thinking about genies and magical fish. We seem to have been transported back to the days of Richard F. Burton, that intrepid nineteenth century British explorer and pornographer.'

And indeed, if we were to continue with the old principle of assuming essentially different and essentially religious, Oriental civilizations, this story about David and Bathsheba, or about Solomon and his ring, would have to remain for Sanskritists nothing more than an exotic oddity, a pleasant escape, but an unexplainable anomaly.

And yet, the Life of Sulaymān is not unique. There is much more literature in Sanskrit that was produced in the middle of the second millennium, in a setting of dialogue with the knowledge traditions expressed in Persian and Arabic, and with those expressed in vernacular languages as well. If we were to adopt new scholarly assumptions, based on a better grasp of historical realities, we might provide our discipline with greater explanatory power for confronting that literature.

Conclusion

All of this began with a rude question: what should the study of Sanskrit at Oxford be for?

I hope that by now this audience will agree with me at least about what it should *not* be for. The study of Sanskrit at Oxford should not be to serve as the handmaiden of state purposes, nor to bring about the religious conversion of "natives." Nor should it be for the sake of invidious cultural comparison; nor to celebrate or endorse social practices that institutionalize human degradation. [Nor, one hopes, should it be solely for encouraging self-congratulation among the very clever.]

But after leaving those rejected possibilities aside, there are plenty of beneficial ones left, and one can hope to add yet more.

South Asia is a hugely populous, and increasingly influential, part of the world. Its history is now tied inseparably with Britain's, as a glance at the faces on any British street tells us. Lately, however, the study of that connected history has been neglected in Britain. And yet, all of our present experience of the rapidly globalizing world tells us that if we are to do well at making our way with one another in the present, an understanding of the histories of the world's societies, in all their intellectual and cultural depth, has never been more important. The study of Sanskrit remains a necessary part of gaining that understanding.

What then, should the study of Sanskrit be for? Many things.

We must give the basic scholarly practices of the subject their due, getting the facts of the matter right, and making headway against the enormous mass of unexamined manuscript material, before this material is lost to worms, mildew, and other hazards.

The amount of literary material that is extant in Sanskrit represents a huge intellectual effort, on the part of many individuals and collective groups, over many centuries. We must understand what it meant for the actors themselves to make such an effort, in their own times and places.

At the same time, we would do well to relax the clenched posture that now holds tight the boundary of our discipline, and to allow this eminently interesting material to be drawn into the global understanding of our present: to make available whatever potential there is in this material that might be of use in our own world, while maintaining responsible custody of the rest.

Finally, part of our work must also include making a reckoning with the past of the subject, in two forms: the history of the field as it has been carried out for the past two centuries, under the circumstances described earlier, and the history of the social implications of the Sanskrit knowledge systems.

Ancient and medieval Indian societies, like many other societies, past and present, incorporated social disparities, and hereditary forms of servitude. Some of our material assumes, even asserts, that social order. If any useful potential is to be reclaimed from the study of Sanskrit, some reckoning with this troublesome aspect of our subject's past is also necessary.

But that would be a worthwhile undertaking. After all, the study of Sanskrit has intrinsic worth. The merit and value and interest that were mentioned earlier, while we were still sitting at Balliol's table, are genuine, and evergreen. There are some Sanskrit texts that everyone would be better off for having read. And there are many recondite joys waiting to be discovered, while wandering the vast uplands of Sanskrit literature, which lie open to expansive, inviting skies.

NOTES

In response to requests for copies of the lecture, I have decided to make this version available in electronic form. The electronic version of the text is available in two formats: one without any formatting or diacritical marks, in MS Word, which should be readable on nearly any computer, the other with formatting and diacritical marks, in a pdf file.

What is presented here is the text of the lecture as delivered. Portions that were omitted on the day itself in order to keep within the time are enclosed in square brackets.

Readers should remember that this was written as a lecture, and its grammar, style, and lack of detailed demonstration all reflect that intention. Furthermore, the spacing on the page is arranged for convenience while delivering the talk.

A proper study of the Sulaimaccaritra is in preparation, in collaboration with David Shulman, of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It is possible that a more carefully produced, literary version of the lecture as such will be published in a print format. Meanwhile I reserve all rights to the text presented here, just as I bear responsibility for all its errors.

I received substantial help in preparing the lecture from many people, but I should mention in particular Gillian Evison, Thomas Trautmann, and especially David Shulman, with whom the research project on the Sulaimaccaritra is in progress. Some of the pertinent bibliography is listed below.

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