

# Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia

*Explorations in the Intellectual History  
of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*

*Edited by*

Sheldon Pollock

Brillhart

DS

423

.F67

2011

© 2011 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper ☺

Typeset in Arno by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

appear on the last printed page of this book.

## *Introduction*

SHELDON POLLOCK

The impact of British colonialism on culture and power has been the dominant arena of inquiry in the past three decades in South Asian studies. A large body of scholarship has been produced in the colonialism-and-X mode: colonialism and economy, colonialism and caste, colonialism and religious categories, art, empiricism, gender, historicity, law, literature, the nation, numeracy, science, sexuality, and so on down the alphabet. A good deal of this scholarship has been both substantively and theoretically exciting and provocative and has changed the way we understand the transformative interactions between India and the West, starting from the consolidation of British power in the subcontinent around 1800.<sup>1</sup> But as many of its practitioners would be ready to admit, colonial studies has long been skating on the thinnest ice, given how far it presupposes knowledge of the precolonial realities that colonialism encountered and how little such knowledge we actually possess.

As I have argued in various forums for some fifteen years—though it will seem breathtakingly banal to frame the issue in the only way it can be framed—we cannot know how colonialism changed South Asia if we do not know what was there to be changed.<sup>2</sup> In the domain of culture viewed broadly, and more specifically with respect to systematic forms of thought, understanding how Western knowledge and imagination won the day presupposes a comprehension more deeply grounded in epistemological and social facts than we now possess of how South Asian knowledge and imagination lost, which in turn requires a better understanding of what exactly these forms of thought were, how they worked, and who produced them. To date, hypotheses on the demise of Indian science and scholarship with the advent of colonialism seem largely dependent on interpretations dominant since the time of Max Weber, which take for granted the presumed uniqueness of Western rationality, technology, rights-bearing citizenship, or capacity for capitalism—

in short, Western modernity—and the inevitability of its eventual global conquest. These interpretations, however, were derived more from assumptions than from actual assessments of data, as Weber, who was quick to emphasize the provisional nature of his ideas, would likely have been the first to acknowledge. Worse, they were based on now discredited notions about the character and history of precolonial Indian economy and society.<sup>3</sup>

What is perhaps worst, these contrastive assessments of non-Western intellectual and cultural history assume a scholarly consensus about the nature of Western modernity itself. As recent work shows all too clearly, however, this consensus has epistemic and empirical lacunae of its own, if there can be said to be any consensus still left. Thinkers, especially sociological thinkers (for whom, as one wry observer has put it, “history tends to be the mildly annoying stuff which happens between one sociological model and another”), are far less readily inclined to bother with the boring task of excavating premodernity than to sit back and simply imagine it—and indeed to imagine it purely as a counterpositive to their preconceptions about modernity. This criticism applies almost without exception to every major social theorist of Western modernity, including Ernst Gellner, Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, and even Bruno Latour, whose dazzling account of why we have never been modern is based on a sense of nonmodernity—what it is or was, when, and where—that is completely unspecified and speculative.<sup>4</sup>

For all these reasons, attempting to understand the “forms of knowledge” in South Asia prior to the coming of colonial modernity is a self-evidently valuable enterprise. Why, however, in the face of all the confusion about modernity, we aim here to investigate forms of knowledge in *early modern* South Asia may be less self-evident.

For the past decade or so the very idea of early modernity has been a much disputed topic of conversation among scholars, both regionalists and generalists. Many object to the apparent teleology of the idea, committing us as it is supposed to do to some inevitable developmental goal.<sup>5</sup> Of course, our inquiry is perforce teleological in the sense that it aims to understand what occurred in the past that enabled us to get us to the *telos*—if that is still the right word here—at which we have arrived. There is no way to forget the end of this story just because we concentrate on the beginning; indeed we would not even know where to begin the story if we did not know how it has ended, since we would not know what the story was. Others object that many so-called early modernities never became full modernities except when mediated through Western modernization. But what if Western modernization short-circuited other processes of dynamic transformation? No given present

was bound to come out of any given past, but our present has come out, and we want to know how and why it has.

Few deny that over the three centuries up to 1800 the world as a whole witnessed unprecedented developments: the opening of sea passages that were global for the first time in history and of networks of trade and commodity production for newly globalizing markets; spectacular demographic growth (the world's population doubled); the rise of large stable states; and the diffusion of new technologies (including gunpowder and printing) and crops from the Americas. If this is a list of material transformations (borrowed from the late John Richards)<sup>6</sup> of what is supposed to make life "modern" rather than just new or different from the past, what part of the world failed to experience early modernity? On the other hand, if we descend from that broad definition of the early modern to the narrow—the presence of fossil fuel technology, constitutional governance, and religious freedom and secularization<sup>7</sup>—there will be no case of early modernity aside from Britain. We may instead want to insist that modernity is additionally, or exclusively, a condition of consciousness. But what kind of consciousness? If we stipulate this a priori, in light of European experience—a new sense of the individual, a new skepticism, a new historical sensibility, to name three master categories—and go forth to find them in South Asia, we are likely to succeed, since one usually finds what one is looking for. Conversely, if we set out to find some highly specific characters—an Indian Montaigne, a Chinese Descartes, an Arab Vico—and somehow do not, well, too bad then, there will be no pre-European South Asian modernity at all.

It is probably the case that much of the current discussion of early modernity is irrelevant for our purposes here, or even an obstruction. As Frederick Cooper has argued with great intelligence, the notion of modernity may have had an important historical role in making claims, but it is virtually useless as an analytic concept (as our sociological speculators show).<sup>8</sup> We are therefore perfectly justified in seeking to understand how variegated the world was at the moment before what would become the dominant form of modernity—colonial, capitalist, Western—achieved global ascendancy, even if that question can be posed only in the moment after. We can call the era "early modern" simply in the sense of a threshold, where potentially different futures may have been arrested or retained only as *masala* for that dominant form. But we may be able to go further. Since the material world changed dramatically during the few centuries prior to this threshold moment, and changed universally, there is good reason to ask how the systems devised for knowing the world responded—or indeed why they failed to respond if they failed—to the world

that was changing objectively between these dates. At the same time there is good reason to resist the teleology (here indeed an infelicity) in the term *early modern* and so refuse to assign the period between 1500 and 1800 any shared structure or content a priori, let alone to insist on finding in it Western modernity in embryonic form (such as the Chinese Descartes). Definitional consistency is precisely the trap we must avoid. What we require is historical synchronicity; we do not require and have no reason to expect conceptual symmetry.

In short the era constitutes an entirely reasonable periodization for intellectual history without leading us to posit any necessary uniformity in the history of intellection that transpired. Everyone began to participate in a world economy, to live in vaster and more complex states, to confront a demographic explosion, a diffusion of unprecedented technology, and larger movements of people in a newly unified or at least unifying world. How did people experience these transformations in the realm of thought? That is what we need to uncover. I believe there may be remarkable parallels awaiting discovery, aside from the shocking fact that the period—an empty vestibule, it has been thought, between premodern high tradition and modern Westernization—has been all but unstudied across much of Asia. But we should not worry if such parallels are not found. A “negative” outcome—resistance, say, or stability in the face of dynamic change elsewhere—producing a global version of what Ernst Bloch famously characterized as modernity’s constitutive “*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*” (a multiplex simultaneity of things that are nonsimultaneous), would be as important as a “positive” one, since we are interested in knowing why people may wish to preserve forms of knowledge in the face of changing objects of knowledge no less than in knowing why they may be prepared to transform them. A negation of Western modernity is, obviously, not necessarily a failure.

It is indeed astonishing, then, that while colonial criticism depends on pre-colonial knowledge, so little of that knowledge has been produced for early modern South Asia, the period prior to 1800, just before British colonial power changed the rules of the knowledge game. It is not as if we do not have the materials to do so. In the sphere of imagination and its written expression South Asia boasts a literary record far denser, in terms of sheer number of texts and centuries of unbroken multilingual literacy, than all of Greek, Latin, and medieval European culture combined. In recognition of this richness an international collaborative research project completed in 2003 undertook a remapping of the literary field across southern Asia, especially for the late pre-colonial period and in relationship to larger cultural and political processes.<sup>9</sup>

With respect to science and scholarship, however, especially during the critical early modern period, in-depth research on most disciplines is only just commencing. Again the requisite materials have long been available in abundance. In fact it can be argued that with the coming of the Pax Mughalana from the second half of the sixteenth century, a new and dynamic era of intellectual inquiry was inaugurated in many parts of the subcontinent. Whole libraries of the manuscripts produced over the following three centuries exist today—and lie unedited, even unread. The factors contributing to this indifference are worth weighing with care. One is certainly the vastly diminished capacity of scholars today—one of the most disturbing if little remarked legacies of colonialism and modernization—to actually read the languages and scripts in which the materials are preserved. But other factors have contributed to the apathy. These include the old Orientalist-Romanticist credo that the importance of any Indian artifact or text or form of thought is directly proportional to its antiquity: the older it was, or such was the belief, the closer it would bring us to Indo-Germanic *Urzeit* and the cradle of European life. Even more important is the colonial-era narrative of Indian decline and fall before 1800, so central to the ideology of British imperialism and its supposed modernizing mission, which of necessity devalued the late precolonial period as an unworthy, because historically defeated, object of study. One highly instructive example, noted by Allison Busch in her essay in this volume, concerns the achievements of Hindi literary science of the period of neoclassicism, the so-called *ritikāl*, or Era of High Style, circa 1650–1850. The astonishing and completely new cultural formation of this epoch was disdained and dismissed by colonized Indian intellectuals no less than by their colonial masters, who viewed it as decadent, depraved, even emasculating. As a result many of the most important works of the period lie unedited to this day, and most of the fundamental questions, whether internal to the intellectual history of India or external and comparative, remain unasked. (What did it mean, for example, for a vernacular language to travel far beyond its place of origin, to become a cosmopolitan idiom available for courtly usage from Bengal to Maharashtra? Why did both northern India and France see the rise of powerful neoclassical movements of astonishing similarity at precisely the same period?) And this neglect and the ignorance it entails is true across the board. Our intellectual and cultural histories of the period remain grotesquely stunted.<sup>10</sup>

To gain some understanding of the style and substance of Indian thought during these centuries, a research project called Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism was initiated in 2001, with support from the Na-



tional Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. The group's ongoing work aims to examine seven disciplines in their bibliographical, prosopographical, and substantive dimensions in order to better understand how scholars in the fields of language analysis, logic and epistemology, hermeneutics, poetics, moral-political thought, life science, and astral science understood their objects of study, what knowledge they produced, and in what specific social contexts.<sup>11</sup> Restricting this research program to Sanskrit materials had at once pragmatic and historical justification. If the project was to remain historically responsible as well as manageable, it was as necessary to narrow the scope to a core language as it was to narrow it to core disciplines.

To be sure, Sanskrit was not the only language of science and scholarship in early modern South Asia, and those who communicated in Sanskrit did not constitute the only community that generated systematic knowledge. We are just beginning to understand how the division of language labor functioned and to clarify who used which languages for which purposes. Persian and vernacular intellectuals produced no less sophisticated work, sometimes in conversation with their Sanskrit-using colleagues—a conversation that seems to have taken place principally in the fields of astronomy and mathematics—but more often, it seems, segregated from them. (Precisely how and to what extent interaction occurred between these different communities now designated by their linguistic or religious preferences are problems in need of serious investigation.) Yet again, despite the quality and quantity and cultural-historical significance of these materials, very little scholarly attention has been devoted to them. While the comparative religion industry, in the United States at least, continues to claim an ever larger market share in the academy, it is almost impossible to find scholars who understand the importance of research on any aspect of precolonial science and scholarship in Persian, Arabic, or the regional languages. In Indo-Persian studies, for example, only in the past several years has research been undertaken on early modern aesthetics, historiography, philology, philosophy, or political thought.<sup>12</sup> The same must be said of most regional language traditions, with the notable exception of Telugu and Tamil, thanks to the pioneering collaborative efforts of Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam.<sup>13</sup> In Tibetan studies, the early modern era may be more richly cultivated, but this has not necessarily been the case of its nonreligious traditions of science and scholarship.

*Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia* thus enters into a strikingly underdeveloped scholarly field, with subfields that have their sometimes radically different scholarly histories and needs. The contributors have accordingly



understood their brief variously. Some have aimed for a large-scale assessment of a whole problematic, whereas others have sought to achieve larger generalizations through the study of representative texts or persons. A review of the main concerns of these quite varied offerings will be of use in orienting the reader.

Part I, "Communication, Knowledge, and Power," begins with a general review of the problem of science and language choice. One of the key factors in the modernization of knowledge production in seventeenth-century Europe was the transformation of the vernaculars into languages of science, as for example in the work of Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo. As I argue in the first essay, although South Asia shared a comparable history of vernacularization in the area of literary production, Sanskrit persisted into the early modern period as the exclusive code for most areas of science, and scholarship more generally, outside the Persianate cultural sphere. It seeks first to delineate the boundaries of this relationship in terms of disciplines and regions, and then to lay out the presuppositions in Sanskrit-language philosophy that militated against the vernacularization of scientific discourse. A useful orientation to the latter problem, which summarizes the dominant position of Sanskrit intellectuals on the eve of colonialism, is the work of the great scholar Khaṇḍadeva on scriptural hermeneutics from mid-seventeenth-century Varanasi.

Sumit Guha continues this theme by opening a historical inquiry into the very complex history of language awareness and language use in the Marathi-speaking regions. In its competition for prestige and status, Marathi had to contend not only with Sanskrit and the newly ascendant Persian of the southern sultanates, but also with Arabic and the increasingly widespread Dakhani, the southern form of what in the north would come to be known as Urdu. Innovative texts like the (Sanskrit) prosimetrical work of Jayarama Pindye, which shows the author's familiarity with a dozen languages, are exemplary of an astonishing linguistic efflorescence. In the midst of this linguistic sea and the changes it was working across all the competing idioms—where, as Guha puts it, a tension existed "between hybridization tending toward assimilation and distinction tending toward establishing identity"—Marathi literati began tentatively to use their language, long a code for religious poetry, as a vehicle for political theory and history, and eventually to seek to provide greater lexicographical discipline, especially in Tanjavur (Tanjore), the easternmost region of the empire. The world of political discourse, for its part, shows a tendency by Marathas—in their continuation by other means of their war with the Mughals—toward the resuscitation of Sanskrit, swimming here against the stream that was elsewhere consigning that language to historical irrele-

vance. In the end the evidence suggests a serious self-awareness of language distinctions and a growing linkage of language and social identification.

The role of the polity in early modern South Asia, and its modes of governance, which are of implicit importance in Guha's essay, come in for explicit assessment in the essay by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. One of the most remarkable polities in early modern South Asia, the Vijayanagara Empire entered a fresh and interesting phase of its existence in the early sixteenth century. New challenges of a fiscal, military, and diplomatic order presented themselves, not least because of the arrival of the Portuguese on the western shores of India. In this context it is useful to know how the problem of imperial management was addressed by Vijayanagara rulers such as Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509–29). Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam look to the masterwork in Telugu by this emperor, *Āmukta-mālyada*. They focus above all on the section concerning *nīti*, or statecraft, and show how received wisdom on the subject was transformed in light of the new challenges and circumstances of the period.

Part II of the book, "Literary Consciousness, Practices, and Institutions in North India," addresses the intellectual and social history of the literary system of classical Hindi. Allison Busch offers a study of the Hindi *rīti*granth (book of method), a major vehicle of precolonial north Indian intellectual life. Expanding patronage networks during the Mughal period fostered the conditions for the development of a new vernacular embodiment of the Sanskrit discipline of literary science (*alaukārāśāstra*). The crystallization of this trend was the *rīti*granth, which was produced in astonishing quantities by a wide range of poets and emerged as the most significant genre of Hindi courtly literature. Busch explores the epistemological world of early modern vernacular thinkers in an attempt to understand both the literary vision they were trying to actualize and the larger intellectual community in which they functioned. New vernacular intellectual practices posed a challenge to traditional language hierarchies, in which Sanskrit had long held unquestioned dominance. She traces the development of vernacular scholarly writing as it both built upon and marked differences from earlier Sanskrit texts. Forging a scholarly discipline in a language medium not sanctioned by tradition took courage, and it also initially engendered feelings of insecurity, an "anxiety of innovation" that is reflected in both the style and the substance of the works.

We can know nothing about early modern knowledge without knowing the texts in which that knowledge is stored. The history of early modern textuality, however, or the history of manuscript culture, as I would prefer to call it, is among the more critically underdeveloped domains of the South

Asian humanities.<sup>14</sup> Imre Bangha's work on the *Kavitāvalī* indicates some of the paths toward progress in this area. The *Kavitāvalī* is a series of some 350 loosely connected quatrains, in strict meters and with the timbre of a personal voice, by the renowned late sixteenth-century poet Tulsidas. The collection gained its form toward the end of the poet's life. An exhaustive inventory of the manuscript material shows the existence of a shorter and a longer recension, both different from the modern published version, and which reveals the process of editing they have undergone. The shorter recension reflects a purist tendency, and the longer what Bangha terms a collector tendency. In a good half of the manuscripts poems were suppressed on the grounds of aesthetic shortcomings rather than because of deviation from religious doctrine. Clearly, in some vernacular traditions faithfulness to the received text was often far less pressing a concern to early modern scribal culture than poetic excellence.

It is rare for scholars in South Asian studies to be able to reconstruct the actual institutions of cultural production. One of the exceptions is the Bhuj Brajbhāṣā Pāṭhśālā (Braj Language School in Bhuj, Gujarat), whose history is carefully reconstructed by Françoise Mallison. From 1749 until 1948 the Bhuj Brajbhāṣā Pāṭhśālā (also called Kāvyaśālā, Poetry School) each year turned out ten or more court poets belonging to bardic castes hailing from the provinces surrounding Kutch, while training other poets belonging to many other castes or creeds. The initiative to educate professional writers and poets for official duty was taken by a local prince, Lakhpatisimha (r. 1741–61), who sought to achieve fame for the Rajput culture of his small kingdom, isolated from the rest of India and yet open to and knowledgeable about the world beyond the Indian Ocean. What the school produced in technical and pedagogical literature as well as works of poetry has been dispersed among many institutions, so that the sources of its history have not yet been fully examined in any way. Even so the materials that are accessible provide us with an almost unique glimpse into the transmission of knowledge and literary activity in early modern western India.

Cultural training is also central to the Persianate cultural order, as explored in Part III, "Inside the World of Indo-Persian Thought." The central concern of the essay by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam lies in the making of a particular form of knowledge in early modern India, namely that carried out by the so-called *munshī*, or scribe. While studies abound on the chancellery literati in Ming and Qing China, few such treatments can be found to explain how the service class of the Mughals was trained, the men who kept accounts, managed estates, and were the real backbone of the state and of subimperial

households. To answer this question the authors turn to the little-known autobiographical account of a seventeenth-century *munshī* named Nek Rai, who lived in the early years of the reign of Aurangzeb. A close reading of his account together with more normative materials allows a rare glimpse into the mind of the *munshī*, and also the tensions that characterized the process of acculturation that produced him.

One of the most remarkable texts to emerge from the cosmopolitan and polyglot world of Mughal India is the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, "The School of Religions," studied by Aditya Behl. Produced from within a Zoroastrian sect that had been persecuted in Safavid Iran and found refuge in India, the *Dabistān* presents the cosmology, angelology, and religious system of an esoteric Zoroastrianism said to have preceded Zoroaster. The text's author, Mūbad Shāh, whose identity remained hidden for several centuries, traveled throughout Mughal India, sometimes in disguise, and mingled with a wide variety of religious virtuosi and holy men. He uses his system to present a wide-ranging survey, arranged typologically, of seventeenth-century Indian religious beliefs and narratives about religious identity and difference. Not least interesting is the quasi-ethnographic side of the work, for some presumably privileged information about other religions seems to have been gathered by Zoroastrians masquerading as members of these other orders. The *Dabistān* presents an extraordinary quest to define the boundaries of religious truth and adjudicate the truth claims of an entire period. The variety of strategies used describes an arc from similarity to incommensurable difference, and the complexity of the responses to other religions confounds any simple notion of tolerance as the leitmotif of the Mughal era.

Ethnography and encyclopaedism also mark the genre of poetry that Sunil Sharma studies in his essay. He is concerned with the rhetorical connections between the Indo-Persian love lyric, commerce, and the city as a medium for the transmission of knowledge about various forms of cultural and social interaction in urban cores. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Muslim centers of power in India were described in a special poetic language that was embedded in tradition but at the same time representative of a new historical mode of thought. This period corresponds to an epoch of Indo-Persian literary innovation and experimentation that later came to be known as the *sabk-i Hindī* (the Indian style) and takes into account the works of selected Iranian émigré poets writing for Indian patrons as well as Indian poets who wrote in Persian and Urdu. Following the political shifts in the eighteenth century this mode of writing developed into two strands, one in the so-called Urdu poetry of decline and another as a full-fledged ethnography of empire, as in the late

Mughal chronicle *Khulāṣat al-tavārikh*, and under colonial patronage, as in the first Urdu chronicle *Ārāish-e Maḥfil* by Afsos, produced at Fort William College. Poetry in early modern South Asia could often be a form of knowledge too, no less than the dull “prose of the world” demanded in the early modern West.

The very modernity of the West, as I noted earlier, is a matter of scholarly disagreement: What actually are the elements that add up to modernity? Most scholars have not considered very deeply whether any of those elements might in fact be derived from the nonmodern world. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi takes on this fascinating question by looking closely at the transregional (South and West Asian) formation of Persianate modernity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before the rise of Orientalism and nationalism rendered such a concept utterly impossible. Part of this story concerns the very intense exchanges between Persianate and European scholars of the period that led to the translation of Descartes and Gassendi into Persian in the 1650s and the importation of European astronomical models in the early eighteenth century and resultant engagements with the theories of Copernicus and Newton. But another part concerns entirely independent discoveries. We now know that it was Mirza I'tisam al-Din, an Indian scholar, who translated for Jones the work that formed the basis of Jones's bestseller, *A Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), and more significantly that it was Siraj al-Din Khan Arzu's *Muṣṣmir* (before 1756) that first established the “affinity” between Sanskrit and Persian, which Jones later used to win renown as “the creator of the comparative grammar of Sanskrit and Zend.” How many other such texts and persons have been lost in the willful amnesia of Orientalism?

In Part IV, “Early Modernities of Tibetan Knowledge,” we turn to some remarkable developments in the intellectual history of Tibet, which for many intellectual and cultural purposes is as much or more within the South Asian sphere as it is the Inner Asian or East Asian, as indeed several of the essays here demonstrate. Kurtis Schaeffer looks at the division of knowledge among Tibetan intellectual historians. Such historians, dating from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth, divided cultural practice into five major arts and sciences (a systematic organization of knowledge and practice comparable to the seven liberal arts of medieval Europe), comprising language, logic, material arts, medicine, and the “esoteric art” of Buddhism itself. In their systematic treatises Tibetan intellectuals reveal their conception of the complex relationships among disciplinary practices, from astronomy to logic, medicine, and finally meditation. It was their understanding of the nature of the bodhisattva and his moral perfection that linked these practices, which were



thought of as elements of a person's ethical training. By the late seventeenth century scholars in turn linked the bodhisattva ideal, and thus the arts and sciences, to the ideology of the Tibetan central government. Thus if culture can be thought of as a complex interplay between tradition, institutional power, and human practice, then in articulating the relationship between the arts and sciences scholars of Tibetan knowledge systems were engaged in nothing less than the construction of culture.

Debates in Tibetan medical writings from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth form the core of Janet Gyatso's contribution. She analyzes the role of empirical evidence, its growing importance in Tibetan medicine, and how it came into conflict with traditional assumptions about scriptural authority. At the same time Gyatso explores various senses of a notion of "experience" in medical theory and practice that came to the fore in the same period and offers an assessment of the influence of Buddhist literary and educational practices on medicine, as well as indications from medical practitioners of their sense of distance from traditional Buddhist authority. Her essay ends with an exploration of the relationship of the new professionalization of medicine to contingencies associated with the emerging Tibetan Buddhist state under the Fifth Dalai Lama and thereafter during the Qing dynasty.

During the eighteenth century Tibetan encounters with the growing Manchu, British Indian, and Russian Empires brought about a sudden awareness in Tibetan learned circles of peoples and places that had literally no place in received knowledge of the world. Though aspects of this new knowledge have been explored in earlier Tibetological scholarship, the epistemological questions raised by this assimilation of new material into established conceptual schemes have not yet been considered. Part of the interest here lies in the analogy we find with the European problem of assimilating the post-Columbian world into Ptolemaic schemes, something that has been much discussed in work on the history of science and exploration during the past several decades. In his essay Matthew Kapstein puts the Tibetan geographical literature of the eighteenth century into dialogue with recent work on the history of geography and cartography in the West. His focal point is the so far unstudied *General Geography* ('dzam gling spyi bshad) of Sum-pa mkhan-pō (1704–87), a work that introduced Tibetan readers to such marvels as the frozen wastes of Siberia and the polar bears of the Arctic Sea.

*Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia* thus covers a wide range of intellectual and historical concerns, from the development of new forms of language and ethnic self-identification, the scientificization of vernacular cul-

tural sensibilities, the actual practices of editing and textual circulation in the era before printing, to the pedagogy and the production of bureaucrats in the Persianate sphere, the intersection of imagination and information, what amounts to a kind of protoethnography but in poetry, and the development of science in relationship to empiricism outside of the usual European framework, where experience and religion seem to have come newly, even “modernly,” into tension with each other. Most readers are unlikely to have heard of any of the fascinating characters who appear in the following pages, including Jayarama Pindye, the multilingual poet at the Maratha court; Cintamani Tripathi, the poetician of *riti*; Nek Rai, the clerk and autobiographer; the Iranian émigré poet Nuruddin Muhammad Zuhuri, ethnographer of Indian city life; and Dar-mo sMan-rams-pa, one of an inner group of physicians close to the Fifth Dalai Lama. Yet these figures will now enter the historical record for what they tell us about the creative reinvention of the world of South Asian thought in the late precolonial period—what I believe we will one day come to understand was an iceberg of creativity, of which the voices we hear in the following pages represent the merest tip.

Our book is the first such collection of its kind, and like all firsts it is tentative and experimental. The contributors all share the aim that, whatever the merits of their particular arguments, they will have succeeded in demonstrating something of the allure and excitement of the general problematic itself. And they hope thereby to stimulate deeper research into one of the most complex eras and areas in global intellectual history, when a whole world of knowledge, of centuries-long standing and singular prestige and importance, began to make its own adjustments to the early modern world before undergoing a transformation more profound and disruptive than any it had previously known.

## Notes

Portions of this introduction appeared previously in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004) and *International Association of Asian Studies Newsletter* (Leiden) 43 (2007).

1. For a recent review, see Washbrook, “Orientals and Occidentals.”
2. See, for example, my “Deep Orientalism?”
3. Weber’s notorious generalizations include the following: “Only in the West does science exist at a stage of development which we recognize to-day as valid”; “Ratio-



nal chemistry has been absent from all areas of culture except the West"; "All Indian political thought was lacking in a systematic method comparable to that of Aristotle" ("Vorbemerkung"). Notable attempts at revision in economic history, to take only that dimension, include Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*; Bose, *South Asia and World Capitalism*; Subrahmanyam, *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India*; Washbrook, "From Comparative Sociology to Global History." For a deeper critique of the very concept of modernity, see Kaviraj, "Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity."

4. See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.
5. Starn, "The Early Modern Muddle."
6. Richards, "Early Modern India and World History."
7. Goldstone, "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World."
8. Cooper, "Modernity."
9. Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*. For a new account specifically of political formations in early modern India, though concentrating on the eighteenth century and using much colonial archival material, see Subrahmanyam, *Penumbra Visions*.
10. Despite a growing interest in the early modern as a conceptual problematic, long-standing positivist and supposedly materialist tendencies in Indian historiography have drastically narrowed the scope of inquiry. Edited volumes assessing the state of the field of research for the last century of our period, like Alavi's *The Eighteenth Century in India* and Marshall's *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History*, resolutely exclude all questions of late precolonial scientific, literary, or intellectual culture. Even where the transformation of the latter is directly thematized, precolonial history is ignored; see Chatterjee, *Texts of Power*; Prakash, *Another Reason*; Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*.
11. For further particulars, see Pollock, this volume.
12. Exemplary work includes Alam, "The Culture and Politics of Persian in Pre-colonial Hindustan" and *The Languages of Political Islam*; Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*.
13. See, for instance, Rao et al., *Symbols of Substance and Textures of Time*.
14. For a general account, see Pollock, "Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture."

## References

- Alam, Muzaffar. "The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan." *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- . *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800*. London: Hurst, 2004.
- Alavi, Seema. *The Eighteenth Century in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

- Arnold, David. *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Bayly, C. A. *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Bose, Sugata, ed. *South Asia and World Capitalism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Chatterjee, Partha, ed. *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Cooper, Frederick. "Modernity." *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Goldstone, Jack. "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 3 (1998), 249–83.
- Kaviraj, Suddipta. "Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity." *European Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 3 (2005), 497–526.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Marshall, P. J. *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Evolution or Revolution?* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Pollock, Sheldon. "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power beyond the Raj." *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*, ed. Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- . "Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India." *History of the Book and Literary Cultures*, ed. Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash, and Ian Willison. London: British Library, 2006.
- , ed. *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Prakash, Gyan. *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Rao, Velcheru Narayana, et al. *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nāyaka Period Tamil Nadu*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Rao, Velcheru Narayana, et al. *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.
- Richards, John. "Early Modern India and World History." *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997), 197–209.
- Starn, Randolph. "The Early Modern Muddle." *Journal of Early Modern History* 6, no. 3 (2002), 296–307.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, ed. *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- . *Penumbral Visions: Making Politics in Early Modern South India*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Tavakoli-Targhi, Mohamad. *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Washbrook, David. "From Comparative Sociology to Global History: Britain and India in the Pre-history of Modernity." *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 4 (1997), 410-43.

———. "Orient and Occident: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire." *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Weber, Max. "Vorbemerkung." *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1934.