

The Knowledge Systems Debate in India

A review of the book titled 'Indian Knowledge Systems (Vol. 1 and Vol. 2)' edited by Kapil Kapoor and Avadesh Kumar Singh, published by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla: Part I

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DI. LOGUE
Science, Scientists, and Society

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Abstract

This is the first part of a two-part review of the book titled *Indian Knowledge Systems* (Vol. 1 and Vol. 2) edited by Kapil Kapoor and Avadesh Kumar Singh, published by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. The review essays are an attempt to initiate a wider critical debate around the discourses, on Indian knowledge systems, especially among the scientific community in India. The essays are relevant and much needed today when questions are being raised about science and the claims made against the Indian knowledge systems by non-scientists, politicians and policymakers. The first part published here, looks at the different contributions contained in the two volumes that seek to expound on Indian knowledge systems, and also raise some preliminary critical questions, on the subjects covered under the rubric of Indian knowledge systems. The second part of the review essay would go deeper into the area of scholarship that is constructed around the term 'knowledge systems' and wider debates around it. The second part will also critically examine the domain that is being referred to as 'Indian knowledge systems' by attempting a more in-depth critique of the some of the papers in the two volumes being reviewed and their claims to be part of Indian knowledge systems.

Keywords. Indian knowledge systems; paradigms; philosophy and science

Introduction

‘Knowledge’ as a category embraces a large and wide spectrum of domains. Science is one of the domains of knowledge. Knowledge has evolved with the evolution of humankind and depending on their ecological contexts, knowledge and cultures have evolved. Attempting to separate a specific domain as a ‘knowledge system’ within any particular national or cultural context is fraught with problems. The task is complicated further when one examines works that use an all-embracing term like ‘Indian knowledge systems.’

With these cautionary introductory statements, let me venture forth into an examination of the contributions in the two volumes in a review in two parts. The contributions in the two volumes have emerged from a seminar organized in 2003 at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS). The proceedings of the seminar were published in 2005 and for some reason, the content of the publication has come to the public notice only in the past year or two. The editors in their preface introduce the background to the seminar and state that “the disciplines/domains of knowledge proposed to be covered included Logic, Philosophy of Language, Technology and Crafts, Polity and Governance, Ethics and Sociological texts, Architecture – the Outer Sciences, Poetics, Aesthetics, Law and Justice, Mathematics and Astronomy, Agriculture, Trade and Commerce, and Medicine and Life Science.” They go on to add, “We strove to cover as many Indian knowledge systems as possible, but naturally could not cover all and quite a few systems, we are sure, would be undertaken for study later. We consistently focussed on Indian knowledge systems and their relevance in India and global situations. The present volumes do not lay claim any comprehensiveness of discussion on various issues pertaining to the Indian knowledge systems. *What we claim is our ceaseless commitment to these Systems and their validity and values* (emphasis added).”

The two volumes together comprise a little over 700 pages with contributions by 34 authors. At the outset, one must confess that in a review article it will not be possible to do justice to both the volumes and all the contributions, in spite of doing a very careful reading of all of them. We shall first review the articles that are part of the collection, before embarking on the second part on a broader discussion on the notion of ‘knowledge systems’; while also looking into some of the critical dimensions of the contributions in the two volumes under review, in order to attempt a critique of the collection as a whole.

Section I - Indian Knowledge Systems: (Ex) Positions

The opening chapter is by Kapil Kapoor (an eminent linguist and Sanskritist) on ‘Indian Knowledge Systems – Nature, Philosophy and Culture’. His contribution is organized into 6 sections. The first speaks about the importance of knowledge in Indian traditions. The second is on the richness and strength of oral traditions; how it is “*constituted, stored and maintained*” (emphasis added). The third section deals with how “knowledge of different domains over

a period of time has been institutionalized as so many disciplines, vidya and crafts, kala.” The fourth section is on “philosophy, nature and character of knowledge”. The fifth attempts to characterize the Indian knowledge tradition. The sixth answers the question, “What are the assumptions, models and methods of Indian knowledge systems?”

Kapoor’s dense and packed contribution demonstrates his scholarship in Indian traditional texts and his understanding and interpretations of this rich resource. His paper, singly, needs a detailed review to do full justice to his contribution by placing it within the larger context of the discussions on the Indian knowledge systems, which will necessitate a discussion in Part II of this review essay. Kapoor opens his contribution with the statement “Indian civilization has always attached great value to knowledge” and goes on to refer to the large body of intellectual texts and to what remains as the world’s largest collection of manuscripts. However, he then proceeds to lay considerable emphasis on how in tradition, “knowledge has been *constituted, stored and maintained* (emphasis added) in the framework of oral culture”. He writes, “A different philosophy of knowledge and of cognitive processes informs this mode of orality. Knowledge in this mode is simultaneous, not sequential/linear – as the case in the *scriptal traditions*” (emphasis added) and adds, “In the oral culture, the scholar has a library in his mind and the speed of information processing is very high, much higher than in the scriptal mode where the information is first transferred to the mind through the senses. In this case, the mind-memory is loaded with large bodies of data – remember that the mind has a much larger capacity to store data than the hard disk of a modern computer – and there is direct visualization of data *with the eyes shut* (emphasis added). He subsequently talks about how large volumes of text could be held mnemonically than in “perishable mediums such as paper, floppy and CD” and cites the example of how the Rgveda has come down intact from over 5000 years while Shakespeare’s plays that were printed in their time have many textual problems in only 500 years. (Page 14, footnote 6).

The second paper in the first section is that of M. D. Srinivas, *Amara Bharati: Sanskrit and Resurgence of Indian Civilization* (emphasis supplied). Its point of interpolation after Kapoor’s contribution remains unclear unless it is to signal indirectly to the readers of these two volumes that Sanskrit is central to the discussion on ‘Indian knowledge systems.’

It remains perplexing why the contribution by a physicist is seen to be so important as to succeed a very scholarly contribution by Kapoor. It is even more perplexing, given that the contribution of Srinivas to the volume is anecdotal and rambling. His paper is a classic case of what is often referred to as ‘anecdotal scholarship’ that is very common in India, especially in the social sciences. To the reviewer, it perhaps indicates a need for acolytes in constructing a domain called the ‘Indian knowledge system’ as is attempted in these two volumes. In the light of Srinivas’s contribution, one may ask why should we not call the subject under examination in the two volumes as ‘Sanskritic knowledge systems’. We are not contesting the organizing of a domain called the ‘Indian knowledge systems’ but the specific way in which the contributions in these two volumes are organized. It corroborates Thomas Kuhn’s ([Kuhn](#) 1970) exposition of how paradigms (in this case knowledge systems) acquire an institutional base in a manner that is comparable to establishing a new religious sect. According to Kuhn, “In putting together a new religious sect, four things are necessary: 1) a founder; 2)

believers; 3) doctrine and scriptures; 4) a believers' organization and physical facilities of some kind" (1). Possibly the role that people like Srinivas perform is to fulfil all, some, or one of the four roles at different points in time for a certain kind of 'revivalism' with regard to 'Indian (Sanskritic?) knowledge systems.' This is perhaps why the writing of the kind that Srinivas produces is included just like that of S. Kalyanaraman at the end of the two volumes. These contributions are however useful in this review essay, in relating our review to discussions that emerge from Thomas Kuhn and his contributions on the subject of 'The Emergence of Paradigms.' Kuhn's perspectives relevantly and effectively address this discussion on 'Indian knowledge systems,' to which we will return in the second part of our review essay.

Indian Knowledge Systems and Science

Part II consists of five papers. The first reads 'Educating Sciences of Life and Mind' by Ananda Wood, the second, 'India's Scientific Mind: A Quest for Infinity' by Michel Danino, the third, 'Dividing the Thousand into Three' by Wagish Shukla, the fourth, 'Some Special features in Procedures of Ganesa Daivajna's Grahalahavam' by S. Balachandra Rao, and the fifth, 'Philosophy and Science in Indian Texts' by Ravi Khanna.

Ananda Wood's contribution tries to tease out the essence of Indian traditions and the manner in which they differ from 'modern sciences' like physics. Two statements, one in relation to nature, and the other a reference to 'modern physics' could illustrate the trajectory of thinking in this contribution by Wood. Talking of 'prana' he refers to it as "an energy of inspiration" and says, "In this conception, nature's actions are all animated from within, by the inner inspiration of prana's living energy. Nature does not function as a partial person, driven by limited and changeable desires for some partial objects of external perception. Instead, the functioning of nature is inspired only for the sake of expressing an inner consciousness: which in itself remains unmoved and unaffected through all of nature's changing acts" (page 57). The second statement of his referring to modern physics and how it is different from 'nature and consciousness' in Indian traditions, relates to how Indian traditions appreciate the five elements. Referring to *air*, he says that it is appreciated "through *vijnanamaya-kosa* or the covering of discernment". On the other hand for him, "In modern physics, the comparison is strictly quantitative, ascribing a mathematical value to each point of space and time and thus formally describing a mathematical value abstracted "field" (page 67).

The next paper by Michel Danino is an excellent paper. Danino discusses 'the quest for infinity' in Indian traditions and historically makes a parallel attempt to illustrate "the Indian approach to scientific knowledge systems" using the example of mathematics and astronomy, two disciplines, which he says were inseparable in ancient times. He also alludes to architecture. It is a very interesting contribution, which appreciatively looks at the development of Indian knowledge traditions, and their fascination with eternity and the exploration of the mind. He achieves this end without being parochial about these traditions while at the same time placing the Indian search for knowledge as part of the larger human thirst for knowledge.

Wagish Shukla's paper, sequentially following Danino, sets out "to explore the concerns of Indian mathematics before the advent of modern times." It is interspersed with polemics against those from what he calls the Judean and non-Judean Prophetism. By the latter, i.e., 'Non-Judean Prophetism' he refers to Christianity, Islam and Marxism as "the most famous and powerful examples". Then follows a series of sweeping ahistorical statements on these traditions and how India has been, for more than a millennium, under attack from the forces of "these non-Judean Prophetisms." If the chaff is taken away, it could have been a good paper on the history of Indian science and the development of Indian scientific knowledge in mathematics. Unfortunately it is not to be, given that polemics, in the cause of ideology, overtakes scholarship - a pitfall for those who write about his or her (culturally speaking) knowledge system, and those who are unable to stand at an objective distance from their own cultures and the injustices that have happened, and are perceived to have happened to them during the course of history. Is it a narrative of victimhood? One is not sure.

The next paper in this section, by S. Balachandra Rao on 'Some Special features in Procedures of Ganesa Daivajna's Grahalaghavam' deals with the development of astronomy in Kerala after Bhaskara II (twelfth century). Ganesa was an astronomer from Kerala and the son of the famous astronomer Kesava Daivajna. Grahalaghavam is the most popular method for pancanga making and according to the author, "still in use today in Northern India, Maharashtra and north Karnataka." This article is not surprisingly supported by the Indian National Science Academy (INSA) and could be a model paper on History and Methods in Studying Early Indian Sciences, a venture that this writer would say does not really exist; an area of study that needs to be cultivated and promoted, as we attempt to do in Part II of this Review.

The final paper in this section by Ravi Khanna, 'Philosophy and Science in Indian Texts', opens with these lines, "Our dependence on the Western systems that we inherited from the British has run its full course. This very West is tiring with its technologies and fragmented areas of specializations, and looking seriously towards the East for alternative *holistic* systems of knowledge. This is best summarised in the article, 'How your Mind can Heal Your Body' in *Time Magazine* special issue (20 January 2003)" and then has a long quote from the above-mentioned article. With such an opening the less said the better about this contribution. It is an odd paper containing a collage of thoughts that refers to Bohr, Pauli, Schrodinger, Heisenberg, Dirac, and De Broglie in one breath, with one line linking them to the development of Quantum Mechanics. A miniature reproduction of Magritte's 'The Human Condition'; a quote from Frijtof Capra, Notes on the Sanskrit Alphabet plus an appendix with poems of R. W. Emerson on Brahma, A. C. Swinburne on Man, and Rabindranath Tagore with 'I'. One is lost, asking in futility to what this melange points to. Certainly not 'Philosophy and Science in Indian Texts.' What then is it about? It could have been easily omitted in the process of assembling these two volumes, even if it was part of the seminar presentations. But it is likely that the organisers of this effort were also attempting something else in this exercise, a point to which we shall return later.

Medicinal Science in India

This part has three contributions. The first one on ‘Modern Medicine and Indian Wisdom’ by Dr. B. M. Hegde, a celebrated presence online, not the least for his talks on YouTube. He writes an excellent and knowledgeable piece, once more showing the difference between those who are also practitioners and those who are just hacks who pontificate on Indian knowledge, culture, and tradition with all the baggage that those terms contain. He, like all those who write of the differences between Western and Indian (non-Western) traditions in Science, in the realm of health sciences, refers to the “reductionism” of modern or western science. While his reference to “reductionism” with regard to health does have some validity, this cannot be given in discussing ‘western science’ and need not be true in all cases of modern and ‘western’ science.

This recourse to ‘reductionism’ also features in the writings of Indian environmentalists like Vandana Shiva and social scientists like Ashis Nandy when they attempt to critique ‘Modern Science’ which they equate with ‘Western Science’. A feature of standard criticism of modern science and western knowledge traditions, mostly done in a sloganeering fashion, is akin to firing at random, hoping it will hit the target. Talking of using ‘reductionism’ as a catch-all term to criticise modern and western science, it will be useful to refer to the Nobel Laureate Jacques Monod’s ([Monod](#) 1972) timeless classic, ‘Chance and Necessity’, wherein he refers to the “old quarrel between reductionists and holists”(2). This is not to say we have any serious quarrel with Dr. Hegde and his contributions. He ends his piece in this collection by saying, “Long live humankind using the help of the best in all systems of medicine”. This is a salutary perspective often missing in the parochial perspectives of non-western knowledge systems and in arguments for such knowledge systems, especially ‘Indian knowledge systems’, which includes many of the contributions in these two volumes, thus, unfortunately, confining the universal aspect of such knowledge systems to a parochial domain. This position is often adopted, paradoxically, after correctly arguing that non-western knowledge systems have their own universalisms and the notion of “universal” is not confined to “western” knowledge systems alone.

The second paper in this section is on ‘Ayurveda as a Knowledge System’ by P. Ram Manohar. His contribution is very thought-provoking. Ram Manohar makes an important argument: “Attempts to understand *Ayurveda*, it seems, have been limited by an overemphasis on external frameworks of reference, so much so that the traditional viewpoint has been eclipsed and neglected. Therefore, a fresh enquiry into the nature of *Ayurveda* is very much called for at this crucial juncture when it is getting all set to become a global phenomenon. *Classically, Ayurveda has sought to define itself as a knowledge system and not merely as a health care approach or medical system*” (emphasis added). This paper is an attempt to critically examine the position assigned to *Ayurveda* by tradition, and in the process also to highlight its strengths and weaknesses as a knowledge system.

The third and last piece in this section is on ‘Social Organization of Knowledge in India-Folk and Classical Traditions’ by A. V. Balasubramaniam and is an overview of what appears to be taking place in ‘Sanskritic knowledge systems’ and other folk and tribal knowledge systems. Interestingly, scholars like Kapil Kapoor (who we have encountered earlier) and the editor of the two volumes under review lay emphasis on the oral nature of the classical Indian knowledge systems starting from the *Rg Veda* and also on the uniqueness and strength of such oral systems, as we have pointed out. The author of this chapter argues partially against the propositions of Kapil Kapoor about the strength of the ‘oral culture’ in Indian knowledge traditions. In the context of extensive research and documentation of folk and tribal traditions, especially with reference to the use of bio-resource in Asia, Africa and Latin America, he makes a point about the uniqueness of the Indian context. He says, “What makes the Indian situation quite strikingly impressive is that we have not merely extensive and deep folk traditions but also classical textual traditions that bear symbiotic relationship to the folk traditions. This offers outstanding opportunity and possibilities for the revival and strengthening of traditional knowledge since *a weakened oral tradition* (emphasis added) can also derive strength and vitality from its classical counterpart. *A linkage between the folk and classical can also infuse new life into theories of classical systems which may have got alienated or cut off to some extent from mainstream Indian society*” (emphasis added). The latter, in the view of the author, of course takes place “particularly in the last two centuries” who, as customarily, seeks to explain the phenomenon by attributing it to the “colonial period”. The contribution in this chapter and the entire quotation to which we have referred is riddled with very problematic statements. We shall approach such contradictions later. Most importantly, apart from a total lack of an ecological perspective, what need to be also pointed out are the claims to an exceptionalism of the Indian context with reference to knowledge and certain amnesia about how India as a society itself has evolved internally in terms of ‘knowledge and power relations’ across hierarchies. There is a tendency in such writings to present the history of India as a kind of ‘pure evolution’, untainted by any deep-rooted internal social causes or with no stagnation or deterioration, other than the travails experienced due to external forces such as ‘colonialism’. How have the internal social and other forces evolved (including in the playout of conflicts among social forces), as well as attempts by ‘textual traditions’ to parasitise, and even in an imperialistic manner, take control of folk traditions, needs examining with intellectual integrity. Only then can any proper evaluation and narration be conducted, on the evolution and survival of diverse systems of knowledge, which can then be organized under the rubric of ‘Indian knowledge systems’. This task will lamentably remain undone, as long as such projects as the one undertaken in this two-volume collection that seeks to establish a certain ‘hegemony in the discussion on Indian knowledge systems’, are supported at the governmental and institutional levels.

Psychology, Polity and Sociological texts

This part has eight contributions. The first is titled ‘Psychology: Five Major Indian Contributions’ by Mathijs Cornelissen, the second, ‘Indian Political Thought’ by Ashok S. Chausalikar, which in turn is followed by ‘Governance According to Manu-Smriti’ by

Bharat Jhunjunwala. The fourth contribution takes for its name ‘Agriculture and Trade in India’ by P. Shashi Rekha, while the fifth reads ‘Treatment of Women in Indian Sociological Texts: With reference to Manu Smriti’ by Chandrakala Padia. The last three contributions in this section are ‘The Indian Noetic Tradition: The Dharmasastras – Bharatiya Jnana Parampara’ by Santosh Kumar Shukla, ‘Vision of Disaster Management in Kautilya’s Arthashastra’ by Niranjana Patel and finally, ‘Indian Psyche – A Note’ by V. Prakasam. We are not attempting an in-depth examination of any of the contributions in Part IV. This being a review essay of the two volumes *in toto*, it is not intended to be a critical examination of each and every contribution in the two volumes. Notwithstanding what has been said, it is equally important to point out that the contributions here are also good candidates for an extended critique on the discourse on ‘Indian knowledge systems’ in India. Why are such discourses so defensive? Why is it that these discourses always have to confront the ‘other’ even when it is not needed? Is it a problem, as I see it, of self-imaging? We shall return to these themes in Part II of our review.

Volume II – Aesthetics and Poetics

This part has five contributions. The first, ‘Alam Brahma’ is by Rewaprasad Dwevedi; the second, ‘Salvation and Knowledge: Ananda Coomaraswamy and the tradition of Indian Aesthetics’ by Chandrasekhar Jahagirdar; the third is ‘Krsna Dvaipayana’s Veda of Life’ by Kavita A. Sharma; the fourth ‘Reading the First Adhyaya of Natya Sastra’ by Makarand Paranjpe; and the last and the fifth paper in this section, ‘Neither Amnesia or Aphasia: Knowledge, Continuity and Change in Indian Poetics’ by Avadesh Kumar Singh, also the co-editor of these two volumes on Indian knowledge systems.

The first contribution is a very short piece regretting why such an important concept as ‘Alam’ from the Agni Purana has not been much noticed, discussed or examined by Indian scholars working in the field of Indian aesthetics. In referring to the second paper in this section, firstly, one must congratulate the editors including a paper on Coomaraswamy in discussing Indian aesthetics. Coomaraswamy has written beautifully on the subject, and as a true admirer from the outside of Indian culture, art and aesthetics, he himself has confessed his bias for Indian culture as against the Western. The contribution in this volume, however, does not do full justice to Coomaraswamy by selective quotations to justify some *a priori* positions on Indian knowledge systems. To be fair to the author of this paper on Coomaraswamy, he does express disagreements with Coomaraswamy in relation to his views on caste and *sati*, for instance. While I have appreciated the inclusion of Coomaraswamy, I am at the same time surprised that another great Indian writer, in my view a philosopher as well, is not only not included as the topic of a contributed article but hardly finds a mention even in passing in these two volumes. We will come to this ‘*missing person*’ later on in Part II and argue in the context of this review, on why should he remain central to such discussions on the Indian knowledge systems.

Moving on to the other papers in this section, Kavita Sharma’s paper is interesting to read, though she is not clear in talking about the Mahabharata and Vyasa and so on, or what is

the central point being pursued, and what are the central arguments in the context of this volume that are being sought to be conveyed. This paper represents the difficulties that the people who read classical Sanskrit texts face; particularly those in India wanting to use Sanskrit texts to buttress arguments, as in the case of these two volumes being reviewed, about the greatness and uniqueness of, for example, Indian knowledge systems. Yet, at the same time, do not have systematic training to deal with these texts. They usually end up nowhere, as in Kavita Sharma's case, when they use these texts to make a point. Since there is so much to extract from and upon which to reflect on these texts, they start meandering all over and at the end, one is not clear what the intention of the undertaking is. How to read old texts and interpret them is itself a science for which training and methodology are mandatory. The problem is that for all the eagerness and anxiety to talk of the importance of Indian knowledge systems, there is hardly any systematic training on how to read classical texts, which far exceeds the mere knowledge of a language like Sanskrit. This is a conversation one has had with many a Sanskrit language teachers in India and Asia, to which we shall deal within Part II of the review.

As a matter of fact, the paper by Avadesh Kumar Singh is another example on how to read texts, and stands out as a better exposition of *Natyasastra* than the paper of Paranjape. It is devoted to "an exposition of and analysis of the first chapter of the *Natyasastra*." While Paranjape is very right in saying, "We need to defossilize these texts by injecting a new life in them," yet his paper is like the voyage of Columbus in 1492, setting out with the right objective but landing up in the wrong country. Referring to the classical Sanskrit texts, he adds, "These are by no means ethnocentric texts, contemptuously referred to as 'Brahmanical' by those who little understand the genealogy of that term but use it merely as an expletive, a term of abuse." The problem, however, is that such polemics (since ideology again takes precedence) as those of Paranjape do not help in any manner or contribute to a situation where a student or a young scientist interested in these texts is guided and helped to do it. In a situation where Sanskrit is taught and when students who pursue the language write their tests in English, unlike the students of other languages who write it in the language they pursue and not in English, the widespread impression is that learning Sanskrit is only a clever ploy to score 100% in language tests. Beyond that, Sanskrit as a language has no value. Who is to blame? We will return to this issue when we make some analysis and commentary on the contributions in these two volumes, on language in general, and on the relationship between 'Ecology, Culture and Knowledge' and the 'Economics of Language.'

Returning to the *Natyasastra*, Avadesh Kumar Singh's fine paper is exemplary in drawing out the diverse critical traditions in Indian thought. More importantly for me, Singh as a scholar of literature is also able to be self-critique on how literature departments in our universities have become similar to retailers for Western wholesale dealers, who deal with thought constructions like **deconstruction**, **postcolonialism** and **post-modernism** and end up running meaningless seminars on these topics. He validly points to what is contained in "Literary Criticism" in the English syllabus and in English literature departments, where there is so little of Indian literary criticism. Equally telling is his criticism of the ways in which we swiftly dumped our rich critical traditions when the West was either craving for Sanskrit or reviving their critical traditions. His references to Prof. G. N. Devy and Prof. Aijaz Ahmed

in the context of referring to Indian literary criticism in English are extremely relevant. His paper has some very useful Appendices including Sanskrit compositions, Indian poetics in Indian languages and works in Hindi on Indian poetics. What is the relevance of all these to the students of science? The answer resides in the fact that it gives us some excellent insights on *why* we must read in a focussed rather than a random manner, and more importantly on *how* we must read our own traditions if we can.

Philosophy, Logic and Language

This part has seven contributions, namely: 1) 'Buddhist Traditions and Knowledge' by Geshe N. Samten; 2) 'Indian Ontology: From Veda to Vedanta' by Shashiprabha Kumar; 3) 'One Universe – Multiple Systems: Two Major Sources' by Renu Malhotra; 4) 'Principles of Determining the Meaning of Words and Sentences: The Mimamsakas Perspectives' by Daya Shankar Mishra; 5) 'Ontology of Speech Sounds' by Rajnish Kumar Mishra; 6) 'Towards a Theory of Syntax' by Bhavatosh IndraGuru and 7) 'Vakyapadiya: Basic Linguistic Concepts' by R. V. Dhongde.

The first contribution was delivered as a valedictory address by Geshe N. Samten in Hindi and was subsequently translated and published in this book. He spoke in Hindi because he did not want to speak in English, which he calls a 'non-Indian' language! Perhaps he should have spoken in Tibetan (which could also be a non-Indian language but which is his mother tongue). Such petty quibbles over linguistic parochialism aside, it is a contribution that is thought-provoking and one must congratulate the organisers of this symposium from which these two volumes emerge for including Buddhism, at least as a Valedictory address, although the question 'why not Jainism' does also arise as indeed for a number of other lines of faith, including animism. The organizers know better. Going back to the paper, a translated and published (in English ironically) version of an extempore talk in Hindi makes it difficult reading. The first part though gives pause for reflection. As he says, "No *parampara* or tradition can be considered alive until and unless it combines the traditions of *sruti* and of *pratipatti*. It is a criterion of considering a tradition as dead or alive. Just because certain texts of a system/tradition are preserved, it does not mean that the *parampara* is alive. To do so we need to find out if it exists in the form of *sruti parampara* and its *pratipatti* i.e., the tradition of practice. The combination of the two keeps a tradition alive" (Vol. II page 406).

One does not know if he is alluding to the fact that Buddhism is a living tradition while the diverse Indian traditions, which are bundled under an envelope term, 'Indian knowledge systems' exist in texts and not in practice. Later, he says, "The Buddhist tradition which existed in places like Nalanda, Vikramshila, etc., had disappeared in India, but is still preserved in Tibet". He does not, on the contrary, go into why Buddhism died in India. Seeking an answer to that question may perhaps give us also an insight into why Indian knowledge systems are in such a parlous state, which most contributors in this volume lament, saying that these are being neglected and relegated to the background in comparison to so-called modern knowledge systems. This contribution also shows how Buddhism was open to

being subjected to examination and scientific observation by western scientists with regard to Tibetan meditation practice.

In the end, Geshe N. Samten makes a very pertinent point with regard to the revival of traditions and traditional knowledge systems, in this case, Indian knowledge systems, which I find in this review article to be worth quoting in full. He says, “When we compare Indian with Western or Modern with classical, we *should not be depreciative in our disposition because both traditions have tried to contribute to the development of humanity in their own way* (emphasis added). The West has made some remarkable studies in this direction and there are a number of things that can be taken from them. The Indian tradition always incorporated any idea worth incorporating, irrespective of its origin. Thus, there is nothing like the concept of absolute purity and if anyone from us claims of absolute purity of tradition she/he speaks of the impossible. We follow the *Yuga-Dharma*, as our tradition accepts that the age leaves its impact on every tradition and we move ahead accordingly. Both in the West and in India, ancient and new traditions and systems of knowledge should strive to enrich and serve humanity. I am sure that the Indian glory would not remain limited to the *sruti* only but manifest itself in concrete terms in days to come” (page 411). I read this passage and thought how relevant it is in this contemporary era, especially in India for our young scientists to keep this perspective in mind; more so when they read some of the contributors to these two volumes, who are so parochial and express an almost racist (verging on, dare I say it, ‘casteist’) superiority about their traditions.

The next contribution on the different schools of philosophy that is part of the Indian ontology is useful, in part because the author of this paper Shashiprabha Kumar does not miss to recognize the Jaina writers, such as Siddasena Divakara and Mallavadina, in the development of the ‘philosophy of being’ in the Indian philosophy. Referring to one of the contemporary Jaina writers, though the author does not mention who he is referring to, states that this Jaina writer who tried to trace the common link between the different schools of philosophy in India, is, according to him, an important guiding principle in the concept of “identity and difference” (page 419) (3). Keeping to this concept of “identity and difference”, accordingly, five schools of philosophy can be classified, represented in Shashiprabha Kumar’s list as Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Samkhya, Vaisesika and Jainism.

Renu Malhotra’s contribution, the third in this sequence, is all praise for the Vedantic Sanatana Hindu Dharma and its uniqueness, compared to other traditions. She opens her paper with the following statement, which needs quoting at length. She says, “A human being is considered the crown of creation by all traditions. However, the reasons for thinking this way differ greatly between the two main source traditions of the world as we know them. The two traditions referred to are, the Vedic *dharma* based traditions of Bharat/India on one side and the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, on the other side. **Each side** (emphasis added) has had its influence on the world at different times. However, only the Vedic *Sanatana* Hindu *Dharma* continues, unbroken since time immemorial. At the present time, the need to reaffirm this ancient tradition is very great indeed as the world seems to lack much of what is noble and thus useful to humanity”. Apart from its anthropocentric view of the universe its

‘us’ versus ‘them’ reduction of history and humanity seems odd in a collection of assumedly scholarly articles on ‘Indian knowledge systems’. She continues in this vein about the Hindu tradition and concludes that “Vedantic Sanatana Hindu tradition when well understood produces a vision for humanity *unmatched anywhere else*” (emphasis added). The fact that such contributions are here says something about the ideology underpinning these efforts, which the reader should be able to ascertain quite easily.

The next four articles, mentioned at the beginning of this section, are all contributions by language study specialists and linguists. They will not only need special discussion later in this review but also will be treated, not just as an outsider’s perspective on language but from another perspective on language itself which we will elaborate later.

Knowledge Formation, Dissemination and Practice

This is the last and final section of these two volumes. The title of Part VII is a somewhat curious formulation to head this section if one considers the four contributions in this section. The title is an apparent afterthought on Indian knowledge systems. The first contribution is ‘Syncretism in Indian Knowledge Systems: A Case Study of Durga Puja’ by Debashish Chakrabarty, the second, ‘Narrative as Epistemology in the Brahmana Texts,’ by Atanu Bhattacharya, the third, ‘Folk Wisdom and Environmental Crisis: A Contemporary Case Study from the Western Himalayas’ by Raghubir Singh Pitra and finally, ‘Saraswati Hieroglyphics and Bharatiya Cultural Continuum: Mlecchita Vikalpa and Bharata Sabhyata’ by S. Kalyanaraman.

The title of this section questions what exactly it seeks to organize in this section apart. The first contribution by Debashish Chakrabarty makes for a compelling read and is a brilliant contribution on the so-called ‘margins’ of mainstream Sanskrit culture. This should have found a place much earlier in these two volumes and been juxtaposed with Kapil Kapoor’s paper. The latter, apart from providing a much needed intellectual honesty to this effort, would have made the collection more interesting to read. The editors, however, must be lauded for including such an article and not editing it out since it ‘speaks truth to knowledge and power’ under examination in these two volumes.

The notion that Indian traditions always had a corridor dimension outside the sanctum sanctorum gets reinforced in this contribution. It opens with a nice kind of query, the kind that provokes serious enquiry though on the surface it seems like a trivial question. “Durga Puja always has been a source of intrigue for me. One of my earliest queries, as my parents inform me, was why the Goddess rode on a lion and not the Bengal Tiger. As one grew up, the questions increased in complexity, but the essential query remained the same – why Durga in Bengal, the land of Kali? It was no wonder that the search became a lifelong passion”. He traces the journey of Hinduism through four broad stages, “the Vedic (from the Rgvedic to the latest *Brahmana* literature), the age of the *mahapuranas* (during the Gupta empire), the age of the *upapuranas* (twelfth and thirteenth century CE) and finally, the colonial and post-

colonial phase. He quotes the *Matsya Purana* where he says that the spirit of change is asserted. He relies on the work of Kunal Chakraborti ([Chakraborti, et al 2001](#)), to say that, “*The need for the upapuranas*” and the singular promotion of Goddess worship of various kinds, “*was to enable the brahmanas to gain a foothold in Bengal where Vedic religion had the least impact*” (emphasis added).

Most importantly, he goes on to say, “The *Puranas*, therefore, tried hard to strive over internal differences of the sectarian brahmanas and project, consistently, Buddhism as the deviant ‘other’. The *Puranas* urged the rulers and the local populace to patronize the brahmanas by giving them gifts for conducting of sacrifices and doing rituals on the rulers’ behalf. Kings were instructed to follow the advice of the brahmanas, exempt them from taxation, grant them land, and above all protect their property and privileges.” He then quotes Kunal Chakraborti, to me a very seminal passage as to why ‘ideology’ triumphed over ‘knowledge’ in the evolution of what may be called Indian knowledge systems. Chakraborti says “the contemporary land-charters came remarkably close to the *Puranas* in endorsing the Brahmanical world view. Buddhism under the influence of the *Tantras* lost its distinct profile as an institutional religion in the eyes of the laity. While Buddha was appropriated as an incarnation of Visnu, lay followers were eventually subsumed within the expansive framework of Brahmanism, which emerged triumphant, at least in the ideological sphere by the twelfth century.”

Debashish Chakraborty refers to Kunal Chakraborti’s analysis of how Brahmanism, I would say with great cunning ([Pierre Bourdieu, et al, 1999](#)) while incorporating and assimilating Durga into its fold also superimposed her with Brahmanical attributes. Other goddesses were made part of her as mere manifestations. He then quotes passages from the *Devi Purana* where Indra and other gods shower praises on the Goddess (really very beautiful descriptions of the Goddess which to me has many *ecological* readings too) and points out how subjugating Durga to satisfy brahminical conditions of *acceptability* at the same time did it without upsetting brahminical notions of hierarchy and superiority in that pantheon. There is a wealth of scholarship to draw from in this paper with regards to ‘Indian knowledge systems.’ In particular, looking at his contribution from an *ecological* prism and the paper’s references to so many aspects from nature also provides arguments from my perspective as to how or why *ecology* somehow in discussions of Indian knowledge systems, except in an instrumental sense, was not critical or central.

The next paper by Atanu Bhattacharya on ‘**Narrative Epistemology in the Brahmana texts**’ also makes for notable reading as a scholarly paper and in my view could be read along with Debashish Chakraborty’s contribution to understanding how *Brahmanas* used narrative as a way to legitimize ritual actions in the development of Vedic religion. Latter being important for constructing the ‘narrative as epistemology.’ This is a critical connection to examine the evolution of Indian knowledge systems, the epistemological dimensions of

Indian knowledge systems, and its relationship to rituals and how specific systems of knowledge are legitimised as knowledge.

The last two papers in this collection are oddities. The first, 'Folk Wisdom and Environmental Crisis: A Contemporary Case Study from the Western Himalayas' by Raghbir Singh Pitra is full of good intentions but turns out a hotchpotch of a text in the end, nothing beyond. Folk wisdom here becomes psychology and how that relates to 'environmental crisis' becomes a very incoherent and convoluted attempt where folk becomes 'native'; finally at the end of the paper expressing gratitude to 'the natives' as part of the Acknowledgements. One wonders in which epoch we are reading this paper. How such papers can pass the test to be included in volumes with such high ambitions in constructing 'Indian knowledge systems' is baffling.

Equally puzzling is the inclusion of the last paper '**Saraswati Hieroglyphics and Bharatiya Cultural Continuum: Mlecchita Vikalpa and Bharata Sabhyata**' by S. Kalyanaraman, in the volume. The paper is over 100 pages, and appears to be a separate booklet or pamphlet. How does this paper contribute to the thrust area of Indian knowledge system perplexes one. This tedious and needlessly protractive paper is another hotchpotch of a contribution with all kinds of sources and references on the *Sarasvati Hieroglyphics* and the so-called '*Bharatiya Cultural Continuum*'. The editors referring to this contribution, in their introduction to the volumes, say that this is an "exhaustive essay" on the topic which brings together "epigraphy, archaeology, numismatics, history, satellite photography and contemporary observations to knit the story of the Sarasvati river and its influence on the civilization and on Indian life". In spite of the Editors bending backwards by pointing to the many knowledge domains plus "contemporary observations" that comprised this paper, to justify its inclusion, this convoluted exercise in this paper is nothing but an attempt to dissociate our history from the Indus Valley civilization and tie it to a 'mythical' Sarasvati river. To do the latter, one supposes the first exercise would be to show that the 'Sarasvati' was not mythical! To what end? All one can say is that this is another pamphlet devoid of any merit that does not belong here unless the editors are also signalling indirectly an underlying ideological dimension bereft of knowledge intentions to the efforts set out through the symposium and in these two volumes. In concluding this part of the review one can say without hesitation that it is these contributions that devalue the overall effort and disperse the focus of these volumes, thereby diluting their value from a scholarly perspective.

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