

Colonialism and its Impact on India: A Critique of Pollock's Hypothesis

Dunkin Jalki

Post-Doctoral Researcher, Department of Religious Studies, University of Pardubice, Czech Republic.
dunkinjalki@gmail.com

This paper attempts to develop a systematic critique of Sheldon Pollock's massive and important work on South Asian cultures. It argues that the absence of a theory of cultural difference undercuts some of the important insights Pollock's work offers about pre-modern South Asian culture. It also claims that the changes brought about by colonialism, without an appropriate theory of culture and cultural change, are comparatively insignificant in understanding colonialism's devastating impact on India.

Keywords: colonialism, culture, indigenous, education.

Introduction

Sheldon Pollock has become a name to reckon with in any study about the ancient Indian past. He has become, with the *Sanskrit Knowledge System on the Eve of Colonialism* project and the co-general editorship of Clay Sanskrit Library¹, the greatest curator, in some senses, of the Indian literary past. Pollock's contribution to the field can be fully gauged only by specialists of Sanskrit and ancient Indian literature. However, as Pollock himself states, there is a hypothesis about colonialism which underlies his work and it is this hypothesis that must stand up to scrutiny for his project to be considered worthy of further examination. This essay examines carefully Pollock's hypothesis regarding how to study colonialism's impact on South Asia (or India, more specifically). The hypothesis in question is a rather blunt but thought-provoking claim: "As I have tried to argue 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" (Pollock 2004: 19). This hypothesis raises at least two difficult questions. (1) How do we find out what was there in South Asia (or India) before it was colonised? (2) How will we ever recover that which is changed or lost for ever? Let us examine how Pollock addresses these questions.

The First Question

The first question is about finding out ways of knowing what was there in South Asia (or India) before colonialism began. We can see two different solutions to this problem in Pollock's work.

The first solution Pollock provides, simply says that we need to do the "boring task of excavating" the data (2004: 19). The existing interpretations of what was there in pre-colonial India, which have been "dominant since the days of Max Weber" are "derived more from assumptions than from actual assessments of data". Pollock further points out that we have abundant "materials to make some sense of culture and power in early modern India [pre-colonial India]...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 and Latin and medieval European culture combined". This answer carries an

optimistic claim that mining the abundant pre-colonial Indian data (which has not been done by scholars of the last 150 years) will somehow reveal deep insights about pre-colonial India as also about what colonialism did to India subsequently. It needs no deep research to see why this answer is rather simplistic. Among other reasons, the following is important for our discussion here. This answer ignores the fact – which, as we will see below, Pollock himself acknowledges – that the current social sciences are ‘Eurocentric’ and are therefore not suitable to interpret pre-colonial data from India.

The second solution, interestingly, speaks about the ‘Eurocentric’ nature of, and therefore the ineptness of, the current social sciences for the task. “There is a natural tendency, exhibited even (or especially) in social and cultural theory, to generalize familiar forms of life and experience as universal tendencies and commonsense”, says Pollock (2006: 259; see also 19). Even though Pollock does not develop this point further in his works, we cannot undermine the importance of this observation since he keeps returning to this point throughout the book, though obliquely (Pollock 2006). Let us first reformulate this thesis in more accessible terms and also make it stronger in the process. *There is a natural tendency in social and cultural theory, to accept (“generalize”) western experience (“familiar forms of life and experience”) as scientific descriptions, and as modes of understanding and living (“tendencies” and “commonsense”) common across cultures.*²

The juxtaposition of these two solutions offered by Pollock raises our expectations about his work. He is aware of the tendency of the current social sciences to generalize western or European experiences as universal. Hence, when he proposes that we should excavate and interpret pre-colonial Indian material to understand the impact of colonialism on India, we can legitimately hope that he has developed ways of interpreting the data that successfully overcomes the problem of the current social sciences. Some of his significant insights about the Indian past, like the one described below, strengthen our expectations too. Pollock reasserts that “[o]ne of the most serious conceptual impediments” in understanding South Asian culture comes from the fact that our tools to understand it are “shaped by western exemplars.” He then offers the notion of *empire* as an illustration. This concept is shaped “by western exemplars in general and by the historical construction of the Roman Empire in particular.” And making use of this concept has produced an imperfect image of “southern Asian *rajya*” (2006: 274). He does not stop at that.

The practices of empire in the two worlds were as different as their principles. No imperial formation arising in the Sanskrit cosmopolis ever stationed troops to rule over conquered territories. No populations were ever enumerated. *No uniform code of law was ever enforced anywhere across caste groupings, let alone everywhere in an imperial polity.* No evidence indicates that transculturation was ever the route to imperial advancement in the bureaucracy or military. (277; emphasis added)

On the contrary, Pollock continues, a “belief that it [the Roman state] was universal and willed by the gods is abundant in Latin literature and is a constituent of Roman thinking from the end of the third century b.c.e. on”.

Indeed once we learn to look free from the prejudgments derived from Roman and later European experience that tend to obscure our vision, there is no cogent evidence that any remotely comparable instrumentality was attached to the numinous status of the overlord in Sanskrit cosmopolities. Here is perhaps the most surprising difference from Rome, given *the lingering Orientalist presuppositions of premodern Indians as priest-ridden and religion-besotted.* (278; emphasis added)

Two points are worth noting in these arguments: a uniform code of law was never enforced anywhere across caste groupings, let alone everywhere in an imperial polity. And, it is an Orientalist presupposition to think of pre-modern India as priest-ridden and religion-besotted.

We can conclude this section by noting the following: the condition under which Pollock's hypothesis is acceptable is when the second solution is seen as a constraint on the first solution. That is, since the current social sciences are problematic, we need to develop new and more sound theories of culture that provide alternative ways of excavating and interpreting the material from pre-colonial India. Only then can the excavation of this material lead to an understanding of the Indian past.

Pollock's Method of Studying Cultures

According to Pollock, a comparative study of two cultures works as "an antidote" to the unjustifiable tendency of the social sciences "to generalize familiar forms of life and experience as universal tendencies and common sense". And it does so "by demonstrating the actual particularity of these apparent universalisms" (2006: 259). Pollock does not elaborate on this claim. Instead, he offers a comparative study of South Asia and Europe, or West and East. Hence, to further our argument, we have to examine his comparative study of cultures.

Pollock keeps the concept *culture* as a rather stable or self-evident entity and focuses on what he calls "its subsets" (Pollock 2006: 2). This raises several questions and doubts. What properties make a culture into a *meta*-level entity, and distinguish it from its subsets? What are the relations between culture and its subsets? There is no answer in Pollock's work to these questions, even though an answer to some of these questions is quite important for understanding his research. By not providing a clear answer, he prompts us to rely upon a reconstruction of his arguments. He claims that:

"rough-and-ready understandings of" culture's subsets, such as, "'culture,' 'power,' and '(pre)modernity'" have "proved adequate for organizing this [his] historical study." He further declares that "[t]here should be nothing problematic about using the term 'culture' to refer specifically to one of its subsets, language, and especially language in relation to literature." But he is emphatic in saying that, "[w]hat should be problematic...is claiming to know and define [the subset of culture called] 'literary'".

To divide a culture into different subsets, to discuss whether a culture includes every element of its subsets or not, to talk about how something can include elements from two different cultures, we need, at the least, a theory of cultural differences. Pollock does not seem to have a theory of culture nor does he presuppose one that helps him solve these problems. Not surprisingly therefore, when Pollock compares two cultures³ to enumerate similarities and differences between them, he argues that except the 'factors peculiar' to South Asia and Europe the other major cultural issues like, "nature, control, and dissemination of literacy" are universal factors. We can reformulate it thus: India and Europe are similar in terms of *culture* (issues like nature of literacy etc.), and the differences they have are the differences in the culture's subsets ('factors peculiar to...').

Similarly, the two major linguistic shifts (from Sanskrit and Latin to vernaculars), that constitute the core research problem of Pollock's works, are not posited as specific to their respective cultures, but there are specificities to these phenomena which separate them from each other. This means that the two cultures are different in any number of ways, but not culturally. Hence, the driving force behind his project is to show how two cultures have more *similarities* than *differences*. The differences shown are differences in the broad similarities that they share. This leads him to compare Java (Indonesia) to England and ask: Can we have a creditable account to explain the abandonment of trans-regional in favour of regional languages and such transformations "as a unified spatiotemporal process connecting Java to England from the beginning of the second millennium through the following three or four centuries"? (2006: 482). From the perspective of this argument, both Europe and India had a polity or a religion. What distinguished India from Europe is the way people related to these entities and the way these entities related to each other.⁴

We can now see that the stronger version of Pollock's thesis, as we formulated it earlier, is not something that Pollock has in mind. The comparative study he proposes is indeed nothing more than the "boring task of excavating" the archives. Instead of solving the existing problems, our analysis of Pollock's notion of culture and comparative studies brings to the fore a major problem in his method of showing the similarities between two cultures to understand them. How will we ever arrive at the differences that make the two cultures under study two different cultures and not one? Put simply, how is Pollock so sure that he is studying two different cultures (England and Java) and not one universal culture? All that Pollock seems to be using here is either his intuitive understanding or the general common sense that England and Java (or the West and the East) are two different cultures.

This intuition or commonsense is then explained through historical analysis. For example, Pollock wonders, as noted earlier, whether we can even use a concept like 'empire', which is "so saturated with the particularities of European history" in understanding India (2006: 6). He then spends an entire chapter to show how the concept 'empire' is based, in its very origin, on a local event such as Roman Empire and hence is not useful in studying the Indian past. Since this argument is based merely on the commonsense understanding of the distinction between the West and the East, it suffers from multiple weaknesses. To bring those weaknesses to the surface, we can make the following observation. Consider the passage:

A radical monism, enunciated in the eighth century and associated with philosopher Śankara...Based on older conception of the self, this system argued, with new discursive rigor, for a...fundamental unity of being. Beginning in the early twelfth century, two major variations on this conception developed. The first...was the 'qualified monism' of the Śrivaishnavas. In their theology a kind of personal individuality of the self was maintained. (Pollock 2006: 430; emphasis added)

A little familiarity with the current developments in the area of studies in self, theology, or individuality would cast sufficient doubt about using these concepts in understanding India.⁵ With this in mind, we can ask of Pollock: What makes the concepts such as *monism* and *theology* acceptable as scientific explanations and not concepts such as *empire*? It might be argued that the notion of *empire* is based, in its origin, on a local event such as Roman Empire, and hence not useful in understanding the Indian past. But consider this example to bring out the fallacy here: even the theories of Einstein are based on his daily experience (and not that of, say, Adolf Hitler), limited to the locality he lived in (and not Bangalore, for instance). Does that mean that we have to discard it as not useful to understand Asia? Pollock has no answers to provide for these questions. Hence, his argument that western concepts are being used to describe India not only remains futile (because we do not know what to make of it), but also ad hoc at best (because there is no theory to support his claims). Further, not having a theory at this stage of his argument makes him inconsistent – while some European concepts *cannot* be used, some others *can* be used, to describe India.

A Theory to Rescue Pollock's Claim

The moral of the story thus far is that Pollock's call to know what existed in pre-colonial India will work only if we develop a theory that will deal with Indian and Western culture and the cultural differences between the two. History and historiography that Pollock employs will create a long list of objects supposed to have existed in the pre-colonial India.⁶ His *The Language of the Gods...* (2006) looks indeed like a long list of such facts. Some of them are indeed breathtakingly refreshing. However, he fails to see the importance of those facts or notice their implications that undercut some of his own arguments in the book.

The alternative we are gesturing towards should be able raise our intuitions about *cultural differences* into a researchable question with testable hypotheses: what makes differences between

human groups into cultural differences? What makes a difference, any difference, into a cultural difference?⁷

The Second Question

Our second question was this: How will we ever recover that which is changed or lost for ever? By reading pre-colonial Indian texts if we are able to identify the objects that have changed at some stage of colonialism, Pollock would say, we can begin to understand what colonialism did to them. This is possible only under one condition. An entity even when it undergoes changes should consist of two types of properties: those that are sufficient to say what it was like in its pre-colonial avatar and those that suggest that it has changed sufficiently, in comparison with its previous avatar. For example, we can talk about a system of education in this way. We can show, through colonial records, what pre-colonial 'Indigenous Indian Education' looked like (a good example of this variety of work is Dharampal 1983). When contrasted with the education system of today, we can get an idea of the changes it has undergone. However, without a sound theory these changes and our intuitions about them will remain in the realm of anecdotes. As anecdotes they cannot prove that colonialism was responsible for the observed changes. The theory, among other things, has to explain how the perceived changes are a result of a historical process. That is, an object (of the kind we are concerned with here) inevitably undergoes changes over a period of time. How do we know which of those changes is due to colonialism and which for other reasons? Yet again, neither has Pollock developed such a theory nor does he subscribe to one that does this work for him.

One of the 'changes' that India witnessed under colonialism is of the kind that is hard to trace, if not untraceable.⁸ Discussing such change our concepts have undergone, or what is more, a '*loss of concepts*', Balagangadhara observes about one such 'absence':

When we go-about with our fellow human beings, we need to possess some or another idea about the nature of ourselves and our fellow human beings. (Call it, for the sake of convenience, an 'intuitive theory' about human beings.)...So, in principle, we must possess a vocabulary to talk about human beings; if we do not, we can neither talk about human beings nor could we make sense of their actions in the world.

We [Indians] do seem to possess a vocabulary and the words in these vocabularies appear to have meanings that make sense to the users of the language. Yet, and this is the absence I am talking about, we [Indians] are unable to identify what these words refer to. The user of the word 'manas' cannot identify which part of him is the 'manas'; he wants to get rid of 'manovikaara' in himself but he does not know whether that means he should not experience 'emotions' (anger, sorrow, contentment...) and, if this is what it means, how not to feel the emotions. Should he control his 'manas' (how does he control what he does not know?), should he keep his 'Chitta' untainted ('chittashuddhi', but he does not know what his chitta is or where it is located except that it has something to do with himself)? How does he do either of the two? He knows he has to do 'sankalpa' but he knows that no matter how often he tells himself ("is this not what 'sankalpa' is?" he asks himself often) not to get angry, he continues to get angry.⁹

This is not a question of language use. It is a question of being cut off from a tradition, which still at some level shapes our experience. More importantly, we have no way of accessing this experience today. That is, even though our experience is shaped by this tradition, we are not aware of it. Our language use, of the kind described by Balagangadhara here, gives hints to both how the tradition shapes our experience and our lost access to it. Will the "boring task of excavating" the pre-colonial Indian data that Pollock suggests as a way of understanding colonialism, help us in this situation? Here is Balagangadhara's answer to this question.

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Many of these things have been explained in the tracts of yesteryears, he has been told. So, he goes and tries to read them but he does not understand much. They talk about 'saptadhaatu', 'panchavaayu', and 'panchakosha' and so on, when they talk about human beings; they talk about horses, chariots and the charioteer, when they talk about 'manas', 'buddhi' and so on. Neither the talk of 'annamayakosha' nor the talk of horses tells him much; his daily language says that humans have 'kapibuddhi' (an apish buddhi that is inconstant) and he reads that 'manas' is very fickle ('chanchala') and flits from one subject to the other. So, is 'manas' then what he used to call 'Budhhi'? If he knows English even a little bit, he is now thoroughly confused: he had thought 'buddhi' was 'intelligence' and 'manas' was 'mind'. He tries to read some or another translation of a philosophical tract and cannot figure out what they are talking about because they invest terms with meanings he has difficulties in associating them with. They speak of 'pramaana' in a way he does not understand (he thought 'pramaana' was to take an oath); and speak of 'anumaana' (which is what 'doubt' is in his daily use) as though it settles issues!

What will the excavation of the pre-colonial data achieve in this kind of situation? How do we ever find out what these concepts from Indian intellectual traditions ever meant?

In short, such tracts, instead of telling him something that illuminates, end up confusing him. They undercut his belief about his use of language so thoroughly that he just does not want to return to these tracts because he knows reading them is (almost) like learning another language. On top of it, he still has to figure out which his 'annamayakosha' is or what the 'dhaatus' (he thought 'dhaatu' had something to do with Sanskrit grammar) are!

All that we can say, if we take Pollock's method seriously and excavate pre-colonial Indian literature is that Indian traditions have changed. His method of studying colonialism fails to explain anything about these changes: their nature, extent, historical reasons or reasons for attributing these changes to colonialism and not just to the passing of time. In fact, Pollock's understanding of colonialism's impact on India will categorically fail to take note of these 'absences', let alone understand them. The kind of changes brought about by colonialism that we can understand through Pollock's method, without an appropriate theory of culture and cultural change, are comparatively insignificant in understanding colonialism's devastating impact on India.

Conclusion

When one excavates the pre-colonial Indian data without a theory, the result looks somewhat like Pollock's *The Language of the Gods...* (2006). It has seemingly refreshing insights on the Indian past. But, and this is the reason why I say 'seemingly', it is not clear what the importance or the implications of these insights are. Consider the insight from Pollock mentioned earlier in the essay, that "[n]o uniform code of law was ever enforced anywhere across caste groupings, let alone everywhere in an imperial polity" (2006: 277). If this is true, it is possible that castes were never seen as one unit (as a social system, that is), as we so conveniently portray them in the present. If a uniform code of law was never enforced across caste and an imperial polity, either no restrictions or rules were ever enforced across caste and a 'state' ("imperial polity") or such restrictions were enforced through other modes. Pollock fails to see such implications of his own insight, and argues that "[f]rom around the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E., when the earliest form of Sanskrit appeared in South Asia, until around the beginning of the first millennium C.E., Sanskrit...was restricted both in terms of who was permitted to make use of the language and which purposes the language could subservise. Access to Sanskrit was reserved for particular orders of society, and it was employed predominantly in connection with the liturgy of the Vedic ritual and associated knowledge systems such as grammar, phonetics, and metrics" (2006: 39). It looks miraculous that two-thousand-years ago, with the kind of transportation and communication media available at that time, a language was restricted across

South Asia to specific castes and purposes. Pollock's book (2006) is full of similar examples where he fails to see the implications of his own insights, and ends up making farfetched claims. And, in this sense, he looks more like a colonial European scholar amazed at the rich material found in India.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/index.html> and <http://www.claysanskritlibrary.org> (Accessed 24 July 2013).

² This stronger version of the thesis has been developed and discussed in the works of S.N. Balangadhara (2005, 2012).

³ As in the following instance: "As in South Asia, the nature, control, and dissemination of literacy crucially affected the creation of vernacular European literary cultures; and, as in South Asia, literacy in western Europe had a specific history, infected by factors peculiar to that world" (Pollock 2006: 439).

⁴ "In all these features—chronology, polity, the localization of the global—the southern Asian and western European cases show quite remarkable parallels. We will then be in a position to consider the factors that make them different and give one the character of a vernacularization of necessity and the other a vernacularization of accommodation" (Pollock 2000: 607).

⁵ See, for instance, Foucault (1985), Bernard Williams (1993), Balangadhara (2005), essays in Bloch, Keppens et al. (2010).

⁶ Pollock calls his *The Language of the Gods* a "historical work" (2006: 2).

⁷ There is a theory that can almost rescue Pollock's work and make his claims about understanding colonialism useful. The theory I am referring to is the research that has developed around S.N. Balangadhara's *The Heathen in His Blindness* (2005). This research will rescue Pollock's work because it has a theory of culture and cultural differences (Balangadhara 2005, 2012). More importantly, Balangadhara's research programme offers, or at least is an attempt to offer, an alternative to the current social sciences, which, as Pollock notes, generalize European forms of life and experience.

⁸ Cora Diamond discusses different kinds of 'conceptual losses'. One is "where we have certain words and use them, but are unable to give them a truly intelligible use". Another one is "where we lack the capacity to use certain words, but, if we had it, we could make intelligible to ourselves important parts of our life and experience" (Diamond 1988: 258).

⁹ S.N. Balangadhara's blog post, dated 5 February 2006, available at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TheHeathenInHisBlindness/message/2199>. See also <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TheHeathenInHisBlindness/message/4428> (Accessed 20 July 2013).

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