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### The 'Classics' in India: Unseen Presence, Cloaked Authority

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## The 'Classics' in India: Unseen Presence, Cloaked Authority

Harish Trivedi

### Abstract

The classics were taught not only in the West but also all over the colonised world –except in India, probably because India was acknowledged to have foundational classics of its own written in a language which was proclaimed by Western scholars to be fully a match of Greek and Latin. However, an earlier connection between Greece and India that began in 326 BCE with the aborted attempt by Alexander the Great to conquer India left enduring cultural traces which have been explored by creative writers and scholars alike. In the hey-day of British rule in India, the British governors and civil servants, who were themselves steeped in classical education, often fashioned themselves on the model of *Pax Romana*, so that the absence in India of a direct classical education was still not exempt from a pervasive classical penumbra.

During the imperial age, to be an educated man under a Western flag in any part of the world was to know the classics, and this applied to areas beyond books and learning as well. In E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* (1924), Cyril Fielding, the British character who is most friendly and sympathetic to the Indians and is often regarded as being the mouthpiece for the author's liberal values, returns to the West after an eventful stint as the principal of a college in India. When he is still some way off from Britain, he begins to feel a strong surge of identification generally with the civilisation he is returning to.

...and then came Venice. As he landed on the Piazzetta, a cup of beauty was lifted to his lips, and he drank with a sense of disloyalty. The buildings of Venice...stood in the right place, whereas in poor India everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of form among idol temples and lumpy hills...[Venice] was part of the Mediterranean harmony. The Mediterranean is the human norm. (Forster 249-50)

Fielding feels sorry for his "Indian friends" for they would never know "the joys of form" as he does; in fact, he now begins to think that this "constituted a serious barrier" between him and them (Forster 250), for this lack obviously renders them as falling below what he here universalises as "the human norm."

### **No classics for India**

To humanise the natives that they ruled was part of 'the civilising mission' that the British took upon themselves to accomplish, and one of the major instruments for bringing about this transformation was by imparting to them education along the Western lines. Ironically, however, Fielding in his college did not teach his Indian students the classics. As I documented in an essay titled "Western Classics, Indian Classics: Postcolonial Contestations" (in a negative discovery which surprised me too), Greek and Latin were never taught in any school or college in India during the two hundred years of British rule, not even at the most elite, expensive and westernised of institutions (Trivedi 2007). The classics were taught apparently in every other British colony including those in Africa and in the Caribbean—and even in Sri Lanka, which is only a short hop away from India at a distance of barely 25 mile—but not in India.

So, what was the reason for the imperial British masters making this singular exception? There seems to be no recorded rationale, for after all it was something that was never officially decided on and never done, but I offered two surmises. First and foremost, before the British began ruling over a significant fraction of India, they had already discovered with utter amazement the riches of the classical literature of India. This was at the beginning of a phase of literary and intellectual activity that is known as Orientalism, in a good sense, before Edward Said gave it a bad name and summarily executed it without a fair hearing. The pioneering scholars here were Sir Charles Wilkins and Sir William Jones, the latter known indeed as 'Oriental' Jones, who both lived in India for long years and translated major Sanskrit works into English, including the *Bhagavadgita* (trans. Wilkins 1785), and *The Ring of Sacontala* (i.e., *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*, a play (trans. Jones, 1789).

It was with this "Oriental Renaissance," as the French scholar Raymond Schwab has called it in the title of a book, that our world became whole and the globe rounded, he suggests, with its two halves, the East and the West, meeting and coming together and beginning properly to know each other. (Schwab 1984). The discovery served to relativise the self-sufficient superiority of the West and to take it down a notch or two in its own esteem. Jones had been a scholar of the classics at University College, Oxford and now, having learnt the classical language of India, he declared: "The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either" (Jones 1786, 26).

In the same lecture delivered to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, Jones went on to add that Sanskrit bore "a stronger affinity" to both Greek and Latin "than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed that no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from a common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists..." (Jones 1786, 26). This bold hypothesis marked the beginning of not only the notion of a Proto-Indo-European language but also of the new discipline of Comparative Philology. Jones's original insight had no small hand in inspiring Ferdinand de Saussure over a hundred years later to

formulate his general theory of linguistics. Saussure too like Jones had begun his academic training with a study of Greek and Latin and then gone on to learn Sanskrit, obtaining his Ph. D. (1880) with a dissertation on the use of the Genitive Absolute in Sanskrit.

So, my first hypothesis to explain why the Western classics were not taught in India was that even before the British acquired the authority to decide what will be taught or not in India, they had learnt that India had a classical language and literature of its own, which was in no way inferior to that of the West and equally the bedrock of its own distinctive civilisation. And the second supplementary hypothesis of mine had to do with a policy formulated half a century later, between 1835 and 1837. By this time the British, through winning some crucial military battles and signing strategic treaties, were in control of a substantial part of India. They had also subdued their main European rivals in India, the French, not through any battle fought in India but by defeating Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815.

From this position of global strength, they now repudiated their liberal 'Orientalist' stance towards Indian culture and adopted what has been called an 'Anglicist' approach, through which they would henceforth rule India with a heavy hand. Rather than learning Indian languages themselves as they had so far done or at least attempted to do, they would now require Indians to learn English instead. This was formulated as the new policy by Lord Macaulay in his "Minute on Education" in 1835 which was officially approved and began to be implemented from 1837 onwards. But if Macaulay too desisted from wanting to teach Greek and Latin in India, it was for a reason breath-taking in its imperialist-chauvinist and anti-classicist audacity:

What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India. The literature of England is now more valuable than the literature of antiquity. (Macaulay, paragraph 15)

So it happened that Greek and Latin were never taught in India and are not taught even now as a part of the regular syllabus in either schools or universities. Apparently, the only situation where sometimes Greek but oftener Latin have been taught to a small band of students was either in seminaries for the training of Catholic priests or, in isolated instances, by a few rare souls who had probably themselves learnt these languages abroad and sought to infect any potential learners with their own enthusiasm. But these were exceptions that served to prove the rule.

It is ironical that while Macaulay was shutting the door on the propagation of Western classical literature, he was during his stay in India from 1834 to 1838 in his leisure hours composing a volume of long poems glorifying the Roman empire, titled *Lays of Ancient Rome*, a book that became immensely popular and was memorised in part or even whole by countless British school-children. What the British continued to swear by at home was not, oddly enough, in accord with Britain's imperial purpose in India, at least in Macaulay's eyes.

### **Absence as Presence: A Long but Sporadic Connection**

"Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence," says Godbole, a philosophically-minded Hindu character in *A Passage to India* who also teaches in Fielding's college (Forster 158). Though he says it in quite another context, it could be suggested that this paradox is equally true of the Western classics in India, and it is this absent presence of the Western classics, and the vast implicit authority they wielded in colonial India, that I propose to explore in the rest of this essay. In the process, I shall look at the historical and cultural connections between the classical world and India beginning in antiquity, and proceed to examine some aspects of what has been called Pax Britannica, on the explicit model of Pax Romana. It similarly marked the high noon of the British Empire, and was a period when all the British Viceroy's and governors and elite civil servants who served in India had been taught Greek and Latin in school and college before they came out to India and were thus imbued with the classical spirit. In fact, Greek and Latin were among the compulsory subjects in the competitive examination through which they qualified to join the imperial service, and the classics infiltrated their colonial mindset in a variety of ways. Those they ruled may not have been subjected to Greek and Latin learning but the rulers whose subjects they were possessed a classical temper.

The connection between Greece and India begins in the year 326 BCE, when India was 'conquered' by Alexander the Great. This was a rare historical privilege which only about a dozen countries in the world can claim, including Persia and India – but it excludes every other major nation of the world as they are reckoned today. India's distinction in this regard is enhanced by the fact that Alexander won only one small battle in India, the battle of Hydaspes, at a remote place on India's Western periphery; the location is now not in India but in Pakistan. It was anyhow a hard-fought battle, and Alexander's campaign professedly to conquer the world came to an end with it, with his own generals and soldiers now having had enough and wanting to return home. India thus also has the distinction of being the country that stopped Alexander in his tracks and sent him right back where he came from. As the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes it:

The fight on the banks of the Hydaspes River in India was the closest Alexander the Great came to defeat. His feared Companion cavalry was unable to subdue fully the courageous King Porus. Hydaspes marked the limit of Alexander's career of conquest... (Matthews)

Not surprisingly then, the hero of that battle in the popular Indian imaginary is not Alexander but the Indian king Porus. After victory, Alexander asked him how he would like to be treated, and undaunted, Porus reputedly replied: "As one king treats another" —whereupon Alexander restored him partially by appointing him a satrap.

Two thousand years later, in the 1930s, a cultural-nationalist sect of Hinduism, the Arya Samaj, popularised a song in which one of the couplets (originally in Hindi) went:

Socrates said to Alexander:  
When you return from your conquest of the world,

Make sure that you bring from India,  
some learned Guru to be my teacher.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, it is not Socrates who is meant here but Aristotle, who had been Alexander's teacher. Incidentally, the word "guru" in Sanskrit and other Indian languages means simply an honoured teacher, and does not carry connotations of either spirituality or glib expertise as it does in English. But in distant India, Socrates and Aristotle probably were Tweedledum and Tweedledee, especially to persons who had never been taught Greek and Latin. Anyhow, this early contact opened up a corridor of cultural traffic and transactions between Greece and India, of which the part concerning the Greek influence on India is rather better documented in comparative cultural studies than the contraflow.

The confidently self-assured view of the Indo-Greek interaction enunciated in the rhyme above from the colonial period of cultural nationalism is to be found replicated also in a quite recent work such as *Two Classical Plays from India* (2018; written in English) by D. P. Sinha. The first play here is titled *Once in India: The Violence of Non-violence*. It is set in the time of Menander, an Indo-Greek king, here spelt Minender (and also spelt Milinda in many old Buddhist texts), who ruled from Bactria a large territory including some border regions of India in the second century BCE. In the opening scene set in Bactria, Minender is seen invoking Zeus to bless him so that his ambition to go deeper into India to conquer its capital may succeed:

Titus [the commander of Minender's army] will weaken the might of India by creating a rift between the Vaidics [Hindus] and the Buddhists. And then, O Zeus, your slave Minender will attack India and Paataliputr [the capital city] to realize the dream of Alexander and Seleucus. O Zeus, bless thy slave to conquer India. (Sinha 15)

The Greeks are opposed in India by the king of the Maurya dynasty, Brihadrath. Titus and his associates are later seen as deceitfully dressing in *cheevars* or cloaks that Buddhist monks wore to hide in that non-violent disguise their violent conspiratorial designs against the Indian king Brihadrath; hence the sub-title of the play, *The Violence of Non-violence*. On the last page, the perfidious "alien invader" is, of course, foiled, as were Alexander and his deputy Seleucus earlier. (Sinha 103). In this conflict of the two great ancient civilisations as depicted in this patriotic play, India remains unvanquished.

There have been several less imaginative and more scholarly explorations of the ancient connection between Greece and India. In her book *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (1999), the prolific Indologist Wendy Doniger first discusses whether the Greeks and the Indians shared a common Indo-Aryan origin, echoing Sir William Jones's seminal speculation in the matter. In the continuing lack of firm evidence, she says both possibilities are wide open, whether it was "Greeks and Indians together against the world...or simply 'we' Greeks against you Indians," (Doniger 6), who only came

together after documented historical contact. In successive chapters, she juxtaposes the “shadow Sita” from the *Ramayana* against “the phantom Helen,” Indra and Ahalya from Indian mythology with the similarly adulterous Zeus and Alcmena, and so on. She ends with the resoundingly gender-centric and politically correct but trans-historical and eminently debatable conclusion that “women in Hindu stories are more like women in Greek stories than they are like men in Hindu stories” (Doniger 306).

In contrast, Roger Woodard in his *Indo-European Sacred Space: Vedic and Roman Cult* (2005) forthrightly subscribes to the theory that there was a shared origin of Indo-European deities before the great migration occurred “in the third millennium BC” (Woodard 265). He asserts that there existed “an ancient Indo-European cult which was parent to the Vedic and Roman ritual practices,” and that “[t]he common linguistic and cultural origin of the Indic and Italic peoples is beyond question.” (Woodard 241, 242) The existence of a common origin would of course encompass the whole of these two civilisations and not be subject to either ahistorical and speculative parallelisms or special considerations of gender.

Some other lines of argument connecting ancient Greece with ancient India relate to or resemble the thesis advanced by Martin Bernal in *Black Athena*, according to which ancient Greece and what it has since stood for had already been infected and influenced by other and older African and Asian civilisations. Again, broad similarities between some schools of Indian philosophy such as the non-dualistic *advaita* and the neo-Platonists have been pointed out. The persistent and invidious issue here is not so much the analogous or commonly inherited similarities but whether, philosophically speaking, the Greek chicken came first or the Indian egg, and both Western and Indian scholars have approached this issue with their respective preconceptions and predilections.

Leaving that crux aside, we may note some more concrete instances of the impact on India of the Greek incursion. One of the words in Sanskrit for all foreigners, whether Greek or later Muslim, is *yavana*, while the word for a stage-curtain is *yavanika*, and an etymological source suggested for both is the word ‘Ionian.’ A more extensive instance is the so-called Greco-Buddhist school of Gandhara art, which began around the first century AD. It depicted the Buddha, who had lived about six hundred years previously (563-483 BC), not aniconically as had been done until then, but in the human form, with a distinctly Indian face but also with a variety of fancy hair-styles ranging from curly to curlier.

Such stone statues began to be recovered in the modern period from various archaeological sites from 1848 onwards, and many of these went to the near-by museum at Lahore, where the curator from 1875 to 1892 was Lockwood Kipling. His son Rudyard Kipling described this style of art in his novel *Kim* (1901):

In the entrance hall stood the large figures of the Greco-Buddhist sculptures done, savants know how long since, by forgotten workmen, whose hands were feeling, and not unskilfully, for the mysteriously transmitted Grecian touch. (Kipling 8)

In my edition of *Kim* for the Penguin Classics, I noted that Rudyard Kipling is reflecting the Western wisdom of his times in valorising the “mysterious” Grecian touch here at the expense of the actual “forgotten workmen” who were presumably Indian. The condescension in the double negative “and not unskillfully” is characteristic of the high-imperial attitude then prevalent, which scholars have since controverted by suggesting rather a Roman influence or an indigenous *yaksha* provenance (Trivedi 2011, 336).

To balance this out, one may mention a man called Heliodorus, a Greek ambassador to a kingdom in central India in the second century BCE. He converted to Hinduism, and erected c. 113 BCE a tall carved multi-sided stone pillar celebrating the Hindu god Vasudeva, a pillar that still stands intact with its long inscription in Sanskrit, as I can personally testify. The local villagers now worship the Pillar itself as a minor holy entity, calling it Khambha Baba, the Pillar Sage, congregate and bustle around it, and offer the usual tokens of worship at the foot of the pillar. In a Sanskrit inscription on the pillar, it is called *Garudadhvaja*, i.e., the flagpole bearing on top an image of Garuda, a mythical bird which is believed to be the personal vehicle of the supreme god Vasudeva (also called Vishnu). This pillar set up by a Greek devotee to a Hindu god still stands tall (at over 20 feet) and dominates the simple rural landscape into which it seems completely assimilated (Personal witness cited in Wallace 222-3).

Before moving on from the Greeks in India, one may mention another Greek Sanskritist who came to India about 2,000 years later, named Dimitrios Galanos (1760-1833). He appears to have translated numerous works from Sanskrit into Greek while living for a half-century, from 1793 to 1843, in the holy city of Banaras (now renamed Varanasi). These were published from Athens in seven volumes posthumously between 1845 and 1853. He seems to have been the only Greek among the Orientalists of that era, and certainly the only one who actually visited India.

### **The British Empire and its Classical Bearings**

This last part of this essay concerns the place of Western classics in India under British rule and will be very short –as was the period of British rule of 200 years in our recorded history of over five thousand years beginning c. 3,200 BCE. Besides, this is the period fairly well known already in its broad historical contours.

In the period of the interaction with India of the (British) East India Company which lasted from 1607 until 1858, the British in India were initially merchants and then unscrupulous extortionists and looters who had come out to make as much money as quickly as possible by any means –to shake the pagoda tree, as the phrase went. There were a few open-minded, sympathetic souls like Warren Hastings, Governor-General for over a decade (1773-85), who appreciated Indian culture and promoted the study of Sanskrit, but he too was quite as corrupt as the next fellow, and when he returned home there were protracted impeachment hearings against him in the British parliament for his unscrupulous exploitation of India for personal gain.



This whole period then was not that of British rule but unruly misrule. The British began ruling India officially and accountably (at least in their own eyes) only in 1858 when, after the “Mutiny” had been quelled, the British sovereign took control and Victoria was declared queen of India and later empress. A well-educated mandarin-like elite civil service was put in place to function as what has aptly been called the “Ruling Caste” (Gilmour 2005). They almost invariably came from the top public schools of England and thereafter Oxbridge, and had had a solid classical education.

It was now that the British began to think of themselves as the new Romans and their empire as a new and suitably updated edition of their revered Roman empire, which was the one imperial template they were closely familiar with through their classical education –and also of course because they had themselves once been ruled by Roman masters. The idea of *Pax Britannica*, that they imposed peace where there had been war, was a sweet imperial fiction, as also in the case of Rome; for both kept the natives quiet through the ever-present threat of war and the occasional use of sheer brute force.

The one single area of administration where the British introduced the largest amount of Latin tags was the law, in order perhaps to give it an exclusive and impenetrable cloak of dignity, and phrases such as *prima facie*, *habeas corpus*, *suo moto*, *ultra vires* and *amicus curiae* can still be come across in India, even in daily reporting of legal cases in the Anglophone press. Another realm where Latin was often paraded was in mottos assigned by the British to institutes of higher education, and here the situation now is piquantly postcolonial. For example, of the first three universities on the Western pattern founded by the British in India in the same year, 1857, one retains its Latin motto (“*Doctrina Vim Promovet Insitam*,” University of Madras), while one appears to have translated it into English (“*Advancement of Learning*,” University of Calcutta); the third, the University of Bombay, has renamed itself as the University of Mumbai (which was the original indigenous name of the place), and has adopted a motto in Sanskrit (“*Shilavrittaphala Vidya*,” a phrase taken from the *Ramayana* of Valmiki) and also a new university anthem written entirely in Sanskrit.

The continuing contestations of the Western classical and the Indian classical are supplemented by an occasional gesture of harmonious co-existence and reconciliation. In the first flush of India’s independence, a number of new institutions were founded under Prime Minister Nehru’s liberal vision, and these included three Academies founded in 1954 to promote different areas of cultural activity. Besides Nehru, who had a degree from Cambridge though not in classics, other national leaders who helped conceptualise these institutions included S. Radhakrishnan, then Vice-President of India who had earlier taught philosophy at Oxford and been a fellow of the All Souls’ College, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, then the Minister for Education, who happened to be born in Mecca and was a distinguished scholar of Arabic. Speaking at the inauguration of the academy of letters on 12 March 1954, Azad explained why the non-Indian term “academy” had been chosen:

We are all aware that this term was first used for the school that Plato established. ...it has, in the course of time, acquired a connotation of its own ... [so as to] signify that is at the same time a School, an Institute and an Association. (Azad, cited in Rao 8)

He specified that the word was to be spelt not “Academy” but “Akademi” and even tasked an errant junior official once to write “Akademi” one hundred times (Sabharwal 2015, 199). The spelling was intended to hark back directly to Plato’s Greece, over and above the head of the colonising English language which had anglicised the spelling of the word to suit its own convenience. Rescuing the word in its Greek form, the two great classical cultures of India and Greece were thus to commingle in free India in the nomenclature of these three new *akademis*, for the preceding parts of their names comprised words from Sanskrit which are still current in most of the modern Indian languages: the Sahitya Akademi, for literature; the Sangit Natak Akademi, for music and drama; and the Lalit Kala Akademi, for the fine arts.

To return to British rule, during their governance of the country the British practised to perfection the strategy of the Roman imperial policy of *divide et impera*—so much so that even when they were finally obliged to leave India in 1947, they first divided the country into two nations, India and Pakistan, and only then left. There is a book by a high English official who witnessed the process titled *Divide and Quit*, though the complicit author puts forward the extenuating thesis that the idea of dividing India was basically a Muslim idea and to the British it was not “in the least attractive” (Moon 12). But of course it was the departing British rulers who sanctioned the idea and implemented it, perhaps as a Parthian shot.

The British anyhow proudly professed all kinds of liberal and democratic values at home in England but in India practised just the opposite. The British historian David Gilmour cites the Oxford classicist Gilbert Murray as remarking, “at home England is Greek. In the Empire she is Roman” (cited in Gilmour 24). But Gilmour then goes on to acknowledge an important discrimination that the British instituted, based squarely on race: “The white dominions were encouraged to take after the old self-governing Greek colonies, while the non-white possessions such as India, Jamaica and later the African colonies were to be ruled like Roman provinces” (Gilmour 24). He adds:

It is not surprising that British administrators should compare themselves to Greeks and Romans: for a majority of them the main subjects of their education had been Latin and Greek.... Most instructive of all, the works of the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, provided justification for rule by an elite. (Gilmour 25)

The comparison of the British Empire to the Greek and Roman models of rule made by the British rulers of India was thus not only flattering to themselves but also self-serving and self-validating. Many of the classically indoctrinated civil servants clung tenaciously to the classics they had read back home as an antidote to their experience of India on the ground. One of them ordered “a Homer and a Horace” so as not “to become an animal” (cited in Gilmour 242). But as if to pin-prick this

Western classical bubble within which many civilians ensconced themselves, there was also the odd case of an Orientalist among them like John Beames who refreshed his “weary soul” with a daily “plunge into Sanskrit and Prakrit” (cited in Gilmour 248).

The British also nurtured on behalf of their empire what Francis G. Hutchins called *The Illusion of Permanence* (1967), for they believed their empire would be as long-lived as the Roman Empire. But here classical history deceived them, for in less than a century of Victoria assuming the reins, India was free. One of the last grand things the British did in India was to build a new capital for themselves, to last a thousand years, as they said. The Viceroy’s House was completed in 1931, but the last Viceroy was out of it in 1947, within sixteen years. The decline and precipitous fall of the British Empire is a narrative even more affecting in many ways than that narrated by Edward Gibbon concerning the Roman empire.

It may be apt to note that the very protocol of the Western Anglophone study of the Indian classics has had a vital Western-classical determinant. From Sir William Jones in the eighteenth century to Sheldon Pollock, probably the most eminent and influential Sanskritist in the West, and (doubtfully) Wendy Doniger even now, Western scholars of Sanskrit have begun their academic training as Western classicists before going on to do India and Sanskrit. It could be suggested that they have, even if unwittingly and only to some extent, viewed Sanskrit through the lens of Greek and Latin which they already knew. A prime example of this is the Murty Classical Library of India published by the Harvard University Press, which appears closely modelled on the Loeb Classical Library now also published by Harvard since the 1970s.

Finally, we may wish to agree that to have two sets of classics, as now made available by the Harvard University Press, is better than having just one. To adapt Kipling, “And what should they know of Homer who only Homer know?” —and not Valmiki. Just a hint of the Other in one’s peripheral vision can often trigger a broadening of one’s perspective. In the year 2004, at a conference at Columbia University under the rubric “Translatio,” I announced another negative discovery of mine —I seem to have a flair for those— that there was no translation *into* the Indian languages until the British came, though there were of course translations out of India in two major instances: into Chinese of the Buddhist scriptures, and into Arabic and Persian after the Muslim contact with India began, of a whole range of literary and scientific texts. Especially under Mughal rule, the two great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were under court patronage translated into Persian and also the philosophical texts, the *Upanishads*. The seeming paradox here is that these Sanskrit epics were rendered, at broadly about the same time, into several modern Indian languages as well, but these versions continue to be regarded in the Indian literary tradition as not translations but works “created afresh” and thus independent works in their own right (Trivedi 2006: 106, 108).

When I propounded this argument at Columbia, a classicist member of the audience, Professor Denis Feeney (of Princeton) was apparently set thinking. As he

later acknowledged in his book *Beyond Greek: The Beginnings of Latin Literature* (2016), he began to wonder after listening to me what might have happened had there been no translation in ancient times in the West either, for example from Greek into Latin (Feeney 18).<sup>2</sup> For in the ancient Western world too, translation was apparently unusual if not unprecedented and certainly not indispensable, as it may now seem in retrospect. As Feeney puts it, “A counterfactual world without a literature in the Latin language is actually –if it is allowable to say– what really should have happened.....,” for one is liable to take translation as a phenomenon “for granted” and forget “what a peculiar thing translation is and how rare certain kinds of translation were in the ancient [Western] world” (Feeney 20, 21).

In conclusion, let me announce a few more negative discoveries of mine, if only to see what *they* might set off. Sanskrit has nothing called ‘tragedy,’ no ‘catharsis,’ no ‘ode,’ no ‘satire’ and no word for ‘classics.’ Not only do equivalent words not exist but the notion or the object does not exist either. On the other hand, and now on a *positive* note, Sanskrit has several literary concepts and practices that Greek or Latin may not even know that they do not have. For example, Sanskrit has epics with just as many cantos as any individual author may wish to write, except that in each canto he must use a different metre. Sanskrit has different categories and names for narratives that are (a) based on a story already well known, or (b) one just invented. It also takes it for granted that poetry is not dependent on a specific form and works written in both prose and verse are equally called *kavya* or poetry.

Further, Sanskrit has a genre called the messenger poem, in which a lover sends a message to his separated beloved not through a human intermediary but with a cloud or a bird or such like; the genre was inaugurated by the greatest Sanskrit poet Kalidasa in the fourth century with his *Meghadoota* (The Cloud Messenger), a poem of approximately 500 lines, and the genre has not lacked for imitators ever since. Sanskrit has several poetic works which comprise either one hundred stanzas, a *shataka*, or seven hundred stanzas, a *saptashati*; it is a familiar and popular genre just like the epic. Sanskrit has dictionaries in verse, even though verse in Sanskrit is seldom rhymed. Sanskrit also has one or two poems which narrate the *Ramayana* story if you read them one way, and the *Mahabharata* story if you read them another way, for each phrase if not each word contains a pun. So, where the West has what is called epic simile, we have epic pun. Speaking of which, we have two distinct categories of pun and separate names for them, *yamaka* and *shlesha*, depending on whether the punning word is used just once, with both meanings together, or twice, with one meaning at a time.

That is only the beginning of a long catalogue of distinctions and differences between the Greek literary culture and the Sanskrit literary culture. But what is perhaps the most significant and pervasive of such differences was brought home to me in a casual conversation with a resident of Athens about fifteen years ago as we both stood waiting at a bus stop. She asked me very kindly if I was a tourist, where I was from and what I had seen. When I had named the famous ancient sites that everyone travels to Greece to visit—the Acropolis, Sounion, Delphi—she pointed

to a big impressive building down the street and asked: "Have you been inside any of those?" I said I hadn't, and she said: "That's a Greek Orthodox church, and over eighty per cent of us Greeks go and worship there" —leaving it unsaid that the Greeks today had no living connection with the older Greek gods and their shrines that I had gone chasing all over the country. I reciprocated by telling her that in India, about eighty per cent of us still followed the faith that had come down to us from about 1200 BCE if not before, and that we still worshipped and acknowledged a pantheon of many of the same gods, including the supreme god of thunder, the sun-god, the fire-goddess, the sea-god, the goddess of learning and the arts, and a god who incarnates himself on earth in the human form whenever evil threatens to overwhelm the followers of the true and right path.

For over three millennia, Western classics, and Indian classics have been like ships passing at night. Let us see if we can now bring them into the twenty-first century and put them together on a code-sharing, connecting flight.

**Note:**

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<sup>1</sup> Oral knowledge, passed down from my grandfather and father.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Feeney's recall here of just what I said is true in spirit but incorrect in substance; for a fuller and more accurate representation of my position, see Trivedi 2006, which Feeney seems not to have seen.

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