The Study of Jyotihśāstra and the Uses of Philosophy of Science

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Abstract This is one of a group of essays (collected in this issue of the journal) about methodological considerations that have arisen for the project on the “Sanskrit knowledge systems on the eve of colonialism.” For the history of the exact sciences in Sanskrit, or Jyotihśāstra, in the early modern period, there are special problems. These have to do with the historically anomalous status of the exact sciences among the śāstras or Sanskrit knowledge systems, and with the predominantly “internalist” method by which most recent research on Jyotihśāstra has been carried out. The essay considers the usefulness for tackling these problems of recent writing elsewhere in the history and philosophy of science, especially the work of Hacking.

Keywords Sanskrit knowledge systems on the eve of colonialism · Exact sciences in Sanskrit · Jyotihśāstra · Early modern · History of science · Philosophy of science

Preamble: The Method and Its Purposes

At first glance, the prospect of raising the question of method among Sanskritists would seem to be a boring one. Not because we as Sanskritists are boring, although that might also be true. But because, after all, the basic method that we use by definition as Sanskritists, the philological-textual method, is a long-established artisanal craft. We have learned it through apprenticeship with skilled masters, not by derivation from theoretical first
principles. Failing the invention of new, as yet unimagined tools or techniques, the craft does not seem susceptible to much change. Editing, reading, sometimes translating Sanskrit texts, and developing interpretations and explanations that of necessity are almost wholly dependent on those readings—these are enjoyable pursuits for those of us who have the time to follow them. But they are not likely to be transformed by any new high-tech equipment. Can we get anywhere by discussing our method?

I suppose that we could take the theoretical wrecking ball to the commitments of our discipline. This might provide some momentary excitement, even relief. But past the first shocking moments, it would not be very satisfying, I don’t think, to those of us left crouching amid the ruins. Yet the discussion of method need be neither dull exercise nor over-stimulating action-adventure, if we begin by putting the question in another way, as follows: these things that we as Sanskritists do, what shall we use them for? And then a second question: can we accomplish that purpose, even in principle, using the techniques that we do use?

In what follows I would like to start from the new purpose to which this working group hopes to put the Sanskritist’s method. My assigned topics for the project are both Jyotihāstra and the ritual prayoga literature, but after some general considerations, I will talk only about the special problems raised by the study of Jyotihāstra, and the challenge those problems raise for our shared purpose. That will lead me to an argument for the usefulness of the philosophy (and history) of science for our methodological considerations.

A Problem for Historicism

One of the ambitions of the Knowledge Systems project is to do something new with Sanskrit studies. We seek, in particular, to find some useful context and historical process for understanding the life of the Sanskrit śāstras, and then to write the śāstras into the history of that particular cultural moment or setting. This ambition is a worthy one. It is desirable for two reasons: First, if it were to succeed, it would help to free the field from the specter of one of its oldest working assumptions—the timelessness and changelessness of Indian civilization. And second, it would enable us to make the historiography of Sanskrit intellectuals comparable to that of authors in other literate societies with historical depth. This approach seems especially useful for the ‘worldly’ (laukika) Sanskrit disciplines—the ones not too specifically religious: poetry (kāvya) and the sciences (śāstras)—since these can be approached as more free-standing intellectual enterprises.

And yet, it seems to me that we run up against a problem that arises from a given of our field: In our well-justified attempt to historicize our material, have we over-corrected our approach from the old habits of Orientalism so much that we are bound by our new program to find change everywhere? For isn’t the durability, over long stretches of time, of the assumptions, methods, and content of the śāstras, the basic datum of our field, in fact?