The Language of the Gods
in the World of Men

Sanskrit, Culture, and Power
in Premodern India

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Map 1. Premodern South Asia: Regions and Physical Features
Map 2. Premodern South Asia: Dynasties and Cities
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Introduction

I feel that if language is understood as an element of culture, and thus of general history, a key manifestation of the "nationality" and "popularity" of the intellectuals, this study is not pointless and merely erudite.

*Gramsci, selections from Cultural Writings*

Das Sein versammelt das Bewusstsein.

*Graffito, East Berlin, November 1989*

This book is an attempt to understand two great moments of transformation in culture and power in premodern India. The first occurred around the beginning of the Common Era, when Sanskrit, long a sacred language restricted to religious practice, was reinvented as a code for literary and political expression. This development marked the start of an amazing career that saw Sanskrit literary culture spread across most of southern Asia from Afghanistan to Java. The form of power for which this quasi-universal Sanskrit spoke was also meant to extend quasi-universally, "to the ends of the horizons," although such imperial polity existed more often as ideal than as actuality. The second moment occurred around the beginning of the second millennium, when local speech forms were newly dignified as literary languages and began to challenge Sanskrit for the work of both poetry and polity, and in the end replaced it. Concomitantly new, limited power formations came into existence. Astonishingly close parallels to these processes, both chronologically and structurally, can be perceived in western Europe, with the rise of a new Latin literature and a universalist Roman Empire, and with the eventual displacement of both by regionalized forms. But the parallels are complemented by differences, too, in the specific relationships between culture and power in the two worlds. Today, the vernacular epoch that began in India and Europe a millennium ago seems to be mutating, if not ending, as the local cultures then created are challenged by a new and more coercive globalization. It may be only now, therefore, that we are able to identify the shape of these past events and to ask whether from their old differences we might learn any new ways of acting in the world.

This is a very large set of issues—the book might have carried as a sec-
pean expansion. These are what I have in mind when identifying what I contrastively and commonsensically call "premodern" South Asian materials, without fretting too much over how "premodern" or "modern" is to be defined or who has the right to define them. Second, I want to determine whether it is possible to conceptually work around such theories of culture-power and to understand what alternative practices may once have been available.

THE COSMOPOLITAN IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The intensifying interactions today between local and translocal forms of culture and ways of political being, which have become truly global for the first time, have generated renewed scholarly interest in the idea of the "cosmopolitan." As many have recognized, the processes at work in contemporary globalization are not altogether unprecedented. But our understanding of what exactly is new and different about them, beyond the sheer fact of their temporal speed and spatial reach, depends on our capacity to grasp the character of the earlier processes of globalization—of a smaller globe, to be sure—and the cosmopolitan identities that have characterized other historical epochs.

The labels by which we typically refer to these earlier processes—Hellenization, Indicization, Romanization, Sinicization, Christianization, Islamization, Russification, and the like—are often used crudely and imprecisely. Yet they do serve to signal the historically significant ways in which the past of being translocal, of participating—and knowing one was participating—in cultural and political networks that transcended the immediate community. These ways varied widely. In Hellenization, the dominant commitment was to a language, a culture, and even an aesthetic; in Christianization, by contrast, to a certain set of beliefs, in Islamization, to a certain set of practices, and in Romanization, to a particular political order—or so one might speculate, and speculation is all one can do for the moment. The comparative study of premodern processes of cosmopolitan transculturation—of how and why people may have been induced to adopt languages or life ways or modes of political belonging that affiliated them with the distant rather than the near, the unfamiliar rather than the customary—is very much in its infancy, even for a phenomenon as significant in the creation, or construction, of the West as Romanization. And when these earlier processes do come under scholarly scrutiny, they are typically not seen as processes at all, ones


17. Arjun Appadurai has rightly cautioned against a "rush to history" meant to neutralize the "special anxiety about its own not-newness" that contemporary globalization seems to provoke (Appadurai 1999). An example is Hopkins 2002.
through whose dialectical interaction the global and the local are brought into being simultaneously and continuously. Rather, they tend to be thought of as pregiven, stable, and sharply defined—the global or cosmopolitan as the exogenous, great tradition over against the local or vernacular as the indigenous, little tradition. They have taken on the character of stable entities that interact in thinglike ways, rather than being seen as constantly changing repertoires of practices.

The local culture-power formations that displaced these quasi-global processes are examined in part 2 of this book, whereas part 3 considers the new cultural theory we are prompted to formulate on the basis of the historical materials supplied by premodern globalism and localism. Prerequisite to these discussions is the analysis in part 1 of the quasi-global formation that characterized early southern Asia—one that came into being around the start of the Common Era and at its height a thousand years later extended across all of South and much of Southeast Asia—and the problems that must be addressed to make some sense of it. The story of how this formation arose—how Sanskrit traveled the vast distance it did and came to be used for literary and political texts, and what sorts of texts meant to the worlds of power in which they were produced—has never been told in the historical detail it merits. Indeed, it is unclear whether the fact that there is a story to tell has been fully recognized.

A number of factors account for this neglect. The temporal and spatial magnitude of the Sanskrit cultural and political order; the conceptual otherness of the subject matter; the apparent anomalousness vis-à-vis peer formations such as Confucian China or Late-Roman Europe, which has served to make the South Asia case almost invisible; the difficulty of the languages involved; the risk of provoking specialists of the particular regions where such study has always been paralleled out; the almost immediate discovery of counterexamples to any tendency one believes to have discerned—all these obstacles have combined to produce a powerful resistance to generalization and large-scale interpretation. In addition, Sanskrit studies have to a brilliant and imperious intellectual tradition that had set its own agenda in the important issues of the human sciences, has had grounds to rest content with addressing the questions predefined by this tradition—and the historical expansion of the realm of Sanskrit culture was not one of them.

Symptomatic of the many problems of understanding this realm and its history is the question of how even to refer to it. The phrase adopted here, "Sanskrit cosmopolis," is not without its drawbacks. Besides being hybrid and historical, it is actually uncospolitan in the cultural specificity of the term.

18. Heine had a sense of this resistance 150 years ago: "Es ist zu wünschen, dass sich das Genie des Sanskritstudiums bemächtige; tut es der Notirengelehrte, so bekommen wir bloss—ein gutes Kompendium" (Heine 1964: 113).
of citizenship implicit in it: membership in the *polis*, or the community of free males. But the very need for such a coinage reveals a social fact of some theoretical importance. Other great globalizing processes of the past found emic formulation and conceptualization, whether in terms of a cultural particularity (Hellenismos or Arabiya or Fārsiyat) or a political form (*imperium romanum* or *guo*, the Sinitic "fatherland"). But for neither the political nor the cultural sphere that Sanskrit created and inhabited was there an adequate self-generated descriptor. Even the word *sanskṛti*, the classicizing term adopted for translating "culture" in many modern South Asian languages, is itself unattested in premodern Sanskrit in this sense. We will find Indian theory distinguishing the great Way, *mārga*, from Place, *deśi* (see chapters 5–3, 10–2), but both terms refer, significantly, only to cultural practices and never to communities of sentiment. If we are therefore obliged to invent our own expression for the transregional culture-power sphere of Sanskrit, the fact that Sanskrit never sought to theorize its own universality should not be seen as lack or failure. On the contrary, it points to something central about the character and existence of the Sanskrit cosmopolis itself: a universalism that never objectified, let alone enforced, its universalism.

The phrase "Sanskrit cosmopolis" carries three additional implications that make it especially useful here. The first is its supraregional dimension ("cosmo-"), which directs attention toward the expansive nature of the formation. The second is the prominence given to the political dimension ("polis"), which was of particular importance in this form of global identification. Last, the qualification provided by "Sanskrit" affirms the role of this particular language in producing the forms of cultural and political expression that underwrote this cosmopolitan order. These different features are examined in the first six chapters of the book.

The history of the Sanskrit language and its social sphere has long been an object of interest to Sanskritists, for this is a curious history that holds considerable theoretical interest. The Sanskrit cosmopolis did not come into being simultaneously with the appearance of the Sanskrit language. Its development was slow and tentative, and for it to come about at all the very self-understanding of the nature and function of the "language of the gods," as Sanskrit was known, had to be transformed. Chapter 1 delineates the circumscribed domain of usage and access that characterized the language from its earliest appearance in history to the moment when this field was dramatically expanded around the beginning of the Common Era. Ritualization (the restriction of Sanskrit to liturgical and related scholastic practices) and monopolization (the restriction of the language community, by and large, to the ritual community) gave way to a new sociopolitical and politicization of the language just around the time that western Asian and central Asian peoples were entering into the ambit of Sanskrit culture. Whether these newcomers, the Sakas (Indo-Seythians) in particular, initiated these processes...
side of Europe, distorting thinking about language and identity, and identity and polity, and thereby occluding the specificity of the Indian case and its relation with models designed to explain the European. The comparative turn is therefore imperative for a history and theory of vernacularity in southern Asia.

The transformations in culture and power that began concurrently in India and Europe around the start of the second millennium were consolidated by its midway point. The rules of the new vernacular genre of polity and poetry had largely been drawn up; the cosmopolitan order in both worlds was almost completely supplanted by the seventeenth century. If it is becoming possible to recognize vernacularization as a key historical problem only now that it is ending, then recognition is the ease apart. Far more difficult is understanding the hard history of its origins, why across much of Eurasia the world abandoned cosmopolitanism and empire in favor of vernacularity and regional politico, and why this happened when it did (chapter 12.2). Whereas we can identify some factors that clearly contributed—reinvigorated trading networks in the early second millennium concentrated wealth in local power centers, the expansion of Islam on its western and eastern frontiers offered new cultural stimuli—a unified explanation of the historical origins of vernacularism is as improbable as a unified explanation of the cosmopolitanism that preceded. Yet the lack does not preclude learning lessons from these events, both for the theory of culture and power and for their practice.

To study the history of vernacularization is to study not the history of the emergence of primitive and natural communities of peoples and cultures but the historical inauguration of the naturalization of peoples and cultures through new conceptual and discursive practices. This naturalization took place in a double procedure of reduction and differentiation: as unmarked discourse was turned into unifying standard, heterogeneous practice into culture, and undifferentiated space into place, new regional worlds were created. What was inside these worlds would eventually be seen as the indigenous and natural; what was outside, as the exogenous and artificial. This did not happen everywhere in a similar manner; not all ways of the cultural production of vernacular sameness and difference have been the same, and more than all cosmopolitanisms have been the same. Figuring out what may have been distinctive about these vernacular and cosmopolitan practices is a precious if elusive prize.

THEORY, METATHEORY, PRACTICE, METAPRACTICE

The rise of the Sanskrit cosmopolitan culture-power formation and its supplementation and eventual supersession by vernacular orders constitute an important chapter in the story of human thought and action. The value of
this story, from the standpoint of this book, lies not in its sovereign particularities but in its capacity to enrich the historical record of large-scale cultural and political processes, and thereby to help prove, improve, or perhaps even disprove and replace, existent theories as only such enriched historical records enable us to do. Several related questions concerning these processes have therefore been implicit in the organization of this exposition from the start, and the very materials have reinforced them at every step of the way. These have long been items on the agenda of social and political analysis and theory, but not often have they been the explicit objects of the empirical histories of the premodern world. It will be useful to restate them as clearly as possible.

First, in accounting for cultural and political change in South Asia over the first millennium and a half of the Common Era, what role is to be attributed to human agency and choice? Why did people choose—and a choice it most decidedly was—to invent entirely new forms of culture? Why did they adopt from others what must often have seemed the less intimately related, cosmopolitan cultural forms—especially in the case of a form so un-intimate and unforgiving as that of Sanskrit—while abandoning older language routines and associated life conceptions that had become habitual? And why did they later reverse course and reject those quasi-global, illustrious, and by then long-familiar practices for other, local ones that were, according to prevailing standards, as yet undistinguished and new, if often made to appear customary? This large problematic is embedded in my term “transculturation,” which has suggested itself in preference to more common ones like “acculturation” precisely because of the sense of agency it seems to connote.

Second, how does culture relate to political orders—culture in the sense of language and the production of texts, and especially texts denominated as kāvyā, sāhitya, poēsia, litterae, literaturae, and the like, which have expressive, imaginative, workly ends? And why were these orders themselves similarly remade over the course of this millennium and a half, with the old aspiration of attaining “power to the horizons” and “empire without end”—diganta rāja, imperium sine fine—being re-placed, literally, by a new concern for locality? This second problematic, culture’s link with power—call it politicization for want of a better term—comprises two closely connected issues. One relates to the reproduction of power and thus to what is familiar in Western social theory as legitimation of authority, ideology, hegemony, and like notions. The other issue relates to the constitution of power and thus to the organization of communities in general and to the two great kinds of organization in particular: (1) empire (as political form) and civilization (as cultural form), as they are called in the West, usually termed in this work the cosmopolitan culture-power complex; and (2) the nation, or here, the vernacular polity and cultural order.

If the purpose of knowing the history reconstructed in the first two parts
of this book is to elaborate higher-order theories of power and culture, especially concerning the large themes of politicization and transculturation, in order to achieve this elaboration it is still necessary to have a more general theory of theory itself and its relationship to empirical work. How in fact is cultural-political theory fashioned from particulars, and how do newly elaborated models stand in relationship to earlier ones? Here we enter into a rather complex logic—a kind of Moebian strip, it sometimes seems—where finding where to begin is no easy thing. One (usually unstated) purpose of social or humanistic theory, whether concerning the development of polity or the place of expressive textuality, is to discover lawlike patterns in human behavior; these are then supposed to be put to use to order and make sense of new data. Such nomothetic theory can be of a very general sort, like Weber's dictum on how societies cohere: "In no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition every such system [of domination] attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy." Or it can be quite specific, as in Bakhtin's dictum on the nature of epic discourse: "The epic world is constructed in the zone of an absolute distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present." Much of what may sound distant and obscure when characterized as nomological thought of this sort tends to mutate into common sense. Epic worlds are now typically seen as perfected and distant from the present; domination is now typically thought to require legitimation. Conceptions of this sort—generalizations extrapolated from what always and of necessity are highly limited sets of particulars—can often inhibit rather than enable thought. Yet the tendency to approach every problem in the history of culture and power with such conceptions firmly shaping one's understanding is hard to shake.

At the most general level of analysis, all perception is admittedly theory-laden, as many sociologists and philosophers have explained. We cannot cognize the world around us without simultaneously fitting our cognitions—or prefitting or retrofiting them, whichever is the true sequence—into the linguistic and conceptual schemata that constitute our world; the formulation of empirical observations becomes possible only within some referential framework. Theory at so intimate a level is very hard indeed to resist. Coupled with this, however, is the belief that already-available higher-order conceptualizations ought to structure our empirical work. The dominance of theory has been such that, in the human sciences at least, we often set out not

30. I examine one such conception in chapter 13.2 ("the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle") but must ignore others completely (e.g., "a situation which every child is destined to pass through and which follows inevitably... the Oedipus complex").
to test it systematically but to deploy it while blithely assuming its truth. We thus do Weberian or Bakhtinian “readings” of political or cultural processes when, as those theories sometimes quite explicitly suggest, we should be examining such processes precisely to evaluate and, if necessary, revise Weber or Bakhtin.

If the examination of empirical materials is the horse to theory’s cart, the horse should not be allowed to follow behind, let alone to wander off without pulling any theoretical load at all (a common failing of philology in general and Indology in particular). For one thing, theory is there to be tested; for another, the whole reason to study new particulars, after all, is to learn something from them—to frame new theory, which will itself become subject to testing. Other objections to prioritizing theory can be found. Leave aside the disarray of contemporary theory itself, more important is the fact that the conditions that have made possible theory as we know it are the very conditions that must limit it, at least for a book like this one. Theories of power and culture—on legitimation of political authority, epic distance in literature, and a host of other questions—have their origins in the West in capitalism and modernity and were devised to make sense of the behavior of power and culture under Western capitalist modernity, the first political-economic and cultural order to theorize its own emergence and specificity. These are the particulars from which larger universalizations have typically been produced, in association with the universalization of Western power under colonialism and globalization. Given the conditions that made them possible, however, extrapolating from these particulars needs serious justification. For understanding the noncapitalist, nonmodern non-West, the theory problem that confronts us is acute. Trapped in the dichotomy of economism and culturalism peculiar to thinking through our own world, scholars typically reduce culture to power or power to culture and miss what may have been different about their relation to each other in the past. It is no easy thing to theorize premodernity without deploying the theoretical instruments forged by modernity, since they are the only ones we have.

These problems can be illustrated by previewing the questions raised by the problem of ideology (chapter 13.3). What role if any should be assigned, in the case of precapitalist South Asia, to the notion of ideology in its strong formulation, as a discourse of false necessity that through systematic distortion naturalizes and reproduces relations of unequal power? Is the problem of how social and political orders cohere, and of the mechanisms at work in their coherence, uniform throughout history? Or does the particular tension between capital and labor under the conditions of unfree freedom in capitalism engender a specific instability along with new ideational forms to

31. One recent review is Dirks 1998.
manage it? Aren't there presuppositions and unwarranted extensions of the particularities of capitalist modernity that one accepts as soon as one begins the search for ideological effects, inhibiting in advance the production of new theory from the empirical matrix—precisely what is required to account for precapitalist cultural and political formations? Theoretical openness would be required even if a consensus about ideology reigned today. How much more so when its usefulness for understanding social cohesion in capitalism itself has been increasingly thrown into doubt.  

Here a vast realm of inquiry opens before us. It is at once too fundamental to pass over in silence, as if we knew all the answers to begin with, and too complex to pretend to examine comprehensively; for any single question it is impossible even to summarize current standpoints. What is offered in part 3 are reflections on a few theoretical positions relevant to understanding premodern South Asia and an assessment of how well these positions fit with our materials and where the theoretical seams need to be let out. Among these perspectives are "cultural naturalism," the view that culture evolves and can be understood through evolutionary biology; several core conceptions about culture in society, especially the place of and commitment to language ("linguism") and the sense of peoplehood ("ethnicity"); and perhaps most important because it is the most widespread, functionalist approaches to explaining culture in relation to power (chapter 13).

This review is followed by a discussion of the two complementary paradigms of Western thinking about culture-power formations: civilization and nation (chapter 14). The former is the usual conceptual framework for understanding cosmopolitan culture and imperial polity, the latter for understanding vernacular culture and national polity. Both frameworks share assumptions about autochthony, but in constituting it they employ opposite historiographical practices. The theory of civilization, or as it is called here, civilizationalism, needs historical scarcity; nationalism, by contrast, requires historical surplus. No civilization wants its origins searched, and every nation does. Civilizationalism promotes a vision of always already perfected formations, which, depending on the historical epoch of the interpreter, either confer their gifts on "retarded or primitive cultures" or confront other already-perfected formations that merely add a foreign bauble here and an exotic bangle there—enculturating as either development or accessorizing. The theory of nations narrows thinking even more dramatically. If for constructivists nations are new and Western and all the rest are deficient and derivative, for nationalists old non-Western nations exist with even deeper and more authentic roots. Both theories of civilizations and theories of nations typically ignore complexity, heterogeneity, and historical

32. An important statement is found in Abercrombie et al. 1990: xv-xxv, 250.
process—precisely what the materials from premodern South Asia compel us to acknowledge.

Following this assessment of some universalizing frameworks for understanding the relationship of culture and power, and their inadequacy in accounting for data provided in the first two parts of this book, an epilogue recapitulates the larger trends identified in the history of this relationship before modernity and weighs the implications of these trends for shaping future practices. An ancient theory of practice in South Asia teaches that thought (figured as spirit, purusa) is inert unless embodied in action (figured as matter, prakriti), whereas action without thought is blind. In keeping with this formulation I hold that a historical reconstruction of past practices, if considered apart from their potential to effect future practices, is an empty enterprise, however obscure the linkage may be between knowledge, especially knowledge of the past, and practices, especially practices yet to come.

An analysis of how, and how variously, people in the past have practiced being cosmopolitan and being vernacular requires therefore a further step, one toward a consideration of what might be called metappractice: learning in some reflexive, self-monitoring, and self-correcting way possibilities of practice different from those of the present through the resources opened up by studies of the nonpresent. The world of capitalist modernity enforces the hard logic of either/or in the domain of both the global and the local—the indigenism of civilizationalism and nationalism can tolerate no less—whereas ways of being both/and, however antinomic this may appear as an abstract proposition of logic, are shown by actual histories of cosmopolitan and vernacular in South Asia to not have been impossible. Learning that other practices have been available in the past may enable us to practice differently in the future.

The possibility of such knowledge is what makes the study of the South Asian past matter to the present. For much of their careers Sanskrit and the high vernaculars were no doubt the voices through which power spoke in South Asia—the voices of the powerless were often silenced in both the literary and the documentary records. But power is always relative, and the powerful of South Asian premodernity became the powerless in the force field of colonialism and capitalist modernity. Understanding the voice of power in premodern South Asia thus requires positive as well as negative critique. The target of negative critique is the violence—it is not too strong a word—exercised by Sanskrit discourses of domination, and although these are not the object of inquiry here, the kind of analysis they require merits comment.33 Domination does not disappear simply by forgetting or destroying the lan-

33. See for example Pollock 1990, 1993a.
guage of domination, as some today believe who burn Sanskrit libraries. The past will not go away by ignoring it or pretending it is past: either we master it through critical historical analysis or it will continue to master us. Complementary to this position is the "cautious detachment" of Walter Benjamin's historian, so often quoted and so often ignored, which we need to cultivate when we examine the texts of power, whether cosmopolitan or vernacular, whether in South Asia or elsewhere: "For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."34

The targets of positive critique are those alternative possibilities of culture and power in South Asia that disappeared with modernity and capitalism but whose traces are preserved in the languages of premodern India. A story is told about the great ascetic Śaṅkara, how by leaving his own body and entering into the corpse of the dead king Amaru, he was able to reanimate him long enough to learn the ways of love. In the same way, if we can enter into these languages in some deep way, by acts of critical philology, historical sensivity, and reflexive interpretation, they may be able to tell us something about ways of life vital for our future.

Epilogue

From Cosmopolitan-or-Vernacular
to Cosmopolitan-and-Vernacular

Few things seem as natural as the multiplicity of vernacular languages used for making sense of life through texts—that is, for making literature. And few things seem as unnatural as their gradual disappearance in the present, especially from the pressures exerted by globalizing English. Literary-language loss is in fact often viewed as part of a more general reduction of diversity in a cultural ecosystem, a loss considered as dangerous as the reduction of biological diversity, to which—in another instance of cultural naturalization—it is often compared. Today’s homogenization of culture, of which language loss is one aspect, seems without precedent in human history, at least for the scope, speed, and manner in which such change is taking place.

Yet as this book has sought to demonstrate, the sense of what is natural needs two important qualifications. First, the vernacular cultural orders that seem to be threatened everywhere were themselves created over time. These are not the primeval lifeways of autochthons; like the Spartoi of Thebes, “the sown people” born from the dragon teeth planted by Cadmus, autochthons do not exist outside of their own mythical self-representation. Second, by the very fact of their creation, the new vernacular cultures themselves replaced a range of much older practices that affiliated their users to a global space rather than to a local place. And it is only now, when the millennium-long vernacular epoch is coming to an end, that this past can be seen as a whole—the grand transformations from the old cosmopolitan to the new vernacular order, and from the vernacular to the new and far more disquieting global order of the present day—and so can be drawn upon for understanding that long history of culture and power. Very different cosmopolitan and vernacular practices have existed in the past, and the histories of these practices and the choices they embodied have something to tell us...
about possible future choices in the face of what often seems to be the desperate alternatives available: a national vernacularity dressed in the frayed period costume of violent revanchism and bent on preserving difference at all costs, and a clear-cutting, strip-mining unipolar globalism bent at all costs on obliterating it.

The language of the gods had a history in the world of men more complicated than any one scholar or book can capture with real adequacy; even summarizing here the findings of that attempt is a challenge. What will be most useful is to briefly review the larger shape of the cosmopolitan and vernacular orders of culture-power in their most salient comparative features. This will be especially helpful for drawing out the implications of their histories, similarities, and differences for a reconstruction of theory and practice and the ways these get produced, as critiqued in the third part of the book. Given my reconstructive aim, the relevance of long-term and comparative historical analysis of literary and political practices, as well as the meaningfulness of past choices to future ones, need to be clarified. I try to do this at the end of this epilogue by reflecting on, first, certain tendencies in contemporary Euro-American thought to rehabilitate an indigenist vernacularism from the left, and then some postcolonial arguments that offer possible escape routes from the dilemmas seen in the various cosmopolitan-vernacular conflicts that closed out the second millennium and have opened the third.

It may be helpful to start by restating why I have proceeded as I have done in this account. Four points of method have been central. First, my intention has been to think about culture and power as action as much as idea, deed as much as declaration. This lets us see that some people in the past have been able to be cosmopolitan or vernacular without directly professing either, perhaps even finding it impossible to justify either one rationally. By contrast, in the attempt to vindicate cosmopolitanism or vernacularism, the very production of a discourse on the universal or the particular has often entailed objectification and abstraction, along with their associated political imperatives, such that the cosmopolitan took on the character of compulsion, and the vernacular, that of inevitability.

Second, the specific practices I have privileged here, because they have been privileged in the historical experience of South Asia, are those of literary culture, or how people do things with texts—expressive, discursive, or political texts. The terms "cosmopolitan" and "vernacular" have largely been taken as modes of literary (and intellectual and political) communication directed toward two audiences whom lay actors know full well to be different: the one unbounded and potentially infinite in extension, the other practically finite and bounded by other finite audiences, with whom, through the very dynamic of vernacularization, relations of ever-increasing incommunicability come into being. It has seemed easiest to think of the distinc-
tion here, in communicative capacity and concerns, as that between a lan-
guage that travels well and one that does not.

Texts and doing things with texts may seem a long way from the desper-
ate choices mentioned above. And yet literary communication has impor-
tantly shaped the social and political sensibilities that make such choices pos-
sible. Literature constitutes an especially sensitive gauge of sentiments of
belonging; creating or experiencing literature that is meant for a large world
or a small place is a tacit declaration of one’s affiliation with that world or
place. The production and circulation of literary texts, accordingly, are not
like the production and circulation of material things. The universalization
of particular technologies, or the particularization of universal ones, that
characterizes a dominant form of contemporary globalization carries no hint
of belonging; the practices of literary culture, by contrast, are practices of
attachment.¹

Third, it has been important for me to understand the language of the
gods in the world of men, and the cosmopolitan and vernacular formations
it helped shape, not only historically but also comparatively, in order to make
the analysis of cosmopolitanism itself more cosmopolitan and to expand the
range of vernacular particulars from which richer generalizations can be
made. The practices of literary communication that actualized these modes
of belonging in southern Asia and western Europe show remarkable chrono-
logical and formal symmetries, but profound differences, too, in both the
mentalties and the modalities of social and political action to which the new
communicative practices related and which they underwrote. These differ-
ences are consequential both for modern theory, which they disrupt, and
for modern practices, which they open up.

The refusal to reify the cosmopolitan or the vernacular by foreground-
ing doctrines while ignoring doings needs to be matched by a refusal to fill
either category in advance with any particular social or political content. The
book throughout has striven to demonstrate how variable this content has
been in the past, and so may yet be in the future. That said, it is no easy thing
to think outside of modern categories. The very particular and privileged
mode of political identity in “cosmopolitan,” for example, undercuts its own
logic of universality, while the very particular and unprivileged mode of so-
cial identity in “vernacular” is crippled by its own specificity. The historical
semantics of our categories have harried us at every step, from “epic” and
“empire” to “novel” and “nation.”

The fourth and last point of method touches on the very purpose of his-
torical reconstruction. A deep archaeology of culture and power seems use-
less in a world such as ours where history usually means last week’s news, and

in an academy where historical thinking has lost its innocence to ideology critique, discourse analysis, or—worst predator of all—boredom. But the problem of why we should want historical knowledge has a degree of urgency directly proportionate to our awareness of the fact that the past is always written from a location in the present. And in the present case the urgency is maximal, since the questions of local and global culture, power, community, and the rest are matters not only of the past but also of the future—matters of choices yet to be made about self and other, freedom and necessity, even war and peace. In the face of such challenges, it is unhelpful to say, as a writer on the history of liberty recently said, that our historiographical purpose should be simply to "uncover the often neglected riches of our intellectual heritage and display them once more to view," holding ourselves "aloof from enthusiasm and indignation alike." This sentiment of dispassion does not become more possible or true the more it is invoked, as it has often been invoked since Tacitus first gave expression to it. Our enthusiasm and indignation shape our argument whether we like it or not—one can hardly doubt that the neo-Roman theory of positive freedom that the historian has so valuably reconstructed is the theory he prefers. And they do more to undermine historical argument the more they are suppressed.

We must come clean about our purposes, and the more modest these purposes are, the better. There is nothing very problematic or theoretically interesting about examining the past to see how people have acted and trying to understand which acts had bad consequences and which had good ones. We do this even though we know that the historical knowledge derived from such an examination carries no guarantee that better practices will follow. A history of cosmopolitan and vernacular orders of culture-power should therefore seek, enthusiastically and indignantly, to compare past choices, when there have been choices, in order to inform future ones—doing history cannot and should not be separated from making history. Those choices will always be responses to conditions of power and culture that are far more complex than any single account can hope to capture, and for that reason often seem to elude any intentional and knowledgeable action. But if intentions and knowledge count, then good intentions are better than bad ones, and knowledge better than ignorance. Śaṅkara, the eighth-century Indian thinker, put it with unarguable simplicity: "Two persons may perform the same act, both the one who understands and the one who does not. But understanding and ignorance are different, and what one performs with understanding becomes far stronger than what one performs in ignorance."

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3. Commentary on Čāndogyā Upaniṣad 1.1.10.
The world of Sanskrit that came into being a little before the Common Era and the world of Latin that arose almost simultaneously were remarkably similar. After centuries of both discursive and geographical limitation, the two languages embarked on an extraordinary career of expressive elaboration and spatial dissemination. Their near-concurrent development as written codes for what in both worlds was conceptualized as this-worldly (laukika, saeculare) communication occurred after centuries of restriction to liturgical, magical, and generally supramundane (and largely oral) textuality. In addition, both quickly achieved unprecedented diffusion across what in both worlds was seen as virtually a global space. As poets from Gujarat to Java were writing Sanskrit, so poets from Spain to Mesopotamia were writing Latin. This universality pertaining to substance as well as to extension. Both worlds evinced a similar style of cultural discipline, discernible in the cultivation of language and in the mastery of the canon of literature and systematic thought. Sanskrit and Latin alike were, in a very literal sense, written to be readable across both space and time—and read indeed they were. And they produced a sense of belonging that affiliated readers to each other across vast space and time.

With these practices of culture, however, the parallels between the two types of cosmopolitanism end. In respect to power they differed as radically as the historical experiences that produced them. Recall for a moment the question of terminology. In contrast to the West, with its political category imperium romanum and literary and cultural category latinitas, there was no self-generated descriptor for either the political or the cultural sphere that Sanskrit created and inhabited. The fact that Sanskrit never sought to conceptualize its own universality is indeed entirely consistent with its historical character as a cultural-political formation, an alternative form of cosmopolitanism in which “here” was not made “everywhere,” but remained “nowhere in particular.” Indissociable from the semantics of these two culture-power orders were their specific pragmatics. Latin traveled where it did as the language of a conquest state, and wherever it traveled—Iberia, North Africa, the Near East—it obliterated the languages it found. The Sanskrit cosmopolis was also created by movement, of course, though not the movements of conquerors. The coercion, co-optation, juridical control, even persuasion of the imperium romanum were nowhere in evidence in the Sanskrit cosmopolis; those who participated in Sanskrit culture chose to do so, and could choose to do so. Far from proscribing local script vernaculars, Sanskrit mediated their creation everywhere it traveled and often at the very moment it arrived. To be sure, these languages were confined to the realm of the documentary for many centuries, but only because the literary function was coterminous with the political function, and the sphere of the political in the cosmopolitan epoch, by definition always “extending to the horizons,” was the exclusive preserve of a Sanskrit that likewise acknowledged no boundaries but those same horizons.
Unlike the *imperium romanum*, the space of Sanskrit culture and the power that culture articulated were never demarcated in any concrete fashion: the populations that inhabited it were never enumerated, standardization of legal practices was nowhere attempted beyond a vague conception of moral order to which power was universally expected to profess its commitment. Sanskrit cosmopolitanism never carried particularistic religious notions like those that marked the recreated cosmopolitan forms of Charlemagne and Otto. Buddhists, Jains, Śāivas, and Vaiṣṇavas all wrote more or less similar poetry and engaged in identical political practices. Sanskrit cosmopolitanism was not about absorbing the periphery into the center but turning the periphery itself into a center, not about taking the whole world into our city (*ingens orbis in urbe fuit*) but taking our city into the whole world (*nagarīṃ ekāṃ ivorvīn imāṃ . . . sāsati*). Sanskrit cosmopolitanism duplicated locations everywhere; it was a world of all centers and no circumferences, with golden Mount Merus and purifying river Gaṅgās appearing ubiquitously.

We have thus two forms of cosmopolitanism—not a European comprehensive universalism and a narrow Asian particularism. While the practices of culture that helped to generate them were remarkably similar, the practices of power with which they were associated were radically different. And if the two cosmopolitanisms were both capable of transcending the local and stimulating feelings of living in a larger world, their modalities were profoundly different: the one coercive, the other voluntaristic.

The broad symmetries that permit comparison between *kāritya* and *śaśa* and *latinitas* and *imperium romanum* are even more in evidence in the vernacular formations that superseded them. Here we have seen an astonishing range of parallels pertaining to the profound and wholly active transformation that occurred in the practices of both literary culture and political power, which formed at once the narrative substance and real-world context of so much of the literature in question. Yet like the two models of cosmopolitanism they replaced, the vernacular formations also show irreducible, and highly instructive, differences.

A coherent constellation of cultural and political features manifests itself in the vernacularization of southern Asia. The literization of local codes was nowhere simultaneous with their literarization; the interval between the two moments lasted in some cases five centuries or more. The dominance of Sanskrit in literary and political text production was ended by a conscious challenge from vernacular intellectuals beginning in south India around the ninth century, with the process everywhere more or less complete by the end of the sixteenth. Literary production consisted to a large degree of texts derived from cosmopolitan genres and appropriating many of their formal fea-

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tures. A new aesthetic of Place, desì, moderated these borrowings by balancing them with local forms, while new projects of spatiality—vernacular chronotopes that plotted out the domain of vernacular culture, putting culture in place for the first time, "the culture-land of Kannada," "the heart of the land of Andhra," "beautiful Lady Lanka"—began to find expression in literary texts. The primary impetus for vernacularization in most cases was provided by ruling elites, who were increasingly turning to the vernacular as the language of political communication, too.

In western Europe, vernacularization began in earnest in late-ninth-century England, where the Latinate literary culture of the Carolingian empire provided the consciously adapted model. Insular vernacular culture was quickly imitated by Anglo-Norman elites, which led to the creation of a Continental French literary culture soon thereafter. In Occitania, Castile, Florence, and beyond, vernacularization spread like wildfire. Perhaps the quintessential moment was at the end of the process, at the court of François I in the mid-sixteenth century, where writers of the Pléiade saw themselves as charged with the task of securing the triumph of the vernacular at the same time as new forms of language governmentality were being instituted by the French court.

With the creation of the cosmopolitan vernacular, the new reading communities, and the new visions of vernacular political space, once again the parallels between the two worlds end. The divergences are equally remarkable and can be found at every level of the vernacularization process: language ideology, including the sources and moral status of language diversity; the correlation between language and community; the linkage between vernacular language and political power.

While care for language was as intense in southern Asia as anywhere in the world, no southern Asian writer before the colonial period ever represented this care through an emotional attachment to language. The vernaculars were languages of Place, not facts of the biology of ethnicized peoples, and the ecocultural zone that made a language was not a region of birth, a natìa. No discourses exist in southern Asia on the origins of languages or peoples, like the myths of languages and peoples, transmogrifying into chronicles and histories of kingdoms and peoples, that can fairly be called an obsession in medieval Europe. No writer in southern Asia ever linked political power with linguistic particularism as did Wenceslas II of Bohemia in the fourteenth century, Lorenzo de’ Medici in Florence a century later, and Du Bellay in Paris a century later still. No language in southern Asia ever became the target of direct royal regulation; sanctions were never imposed requiring the use of one and prohibiting the use of another. At the time when episodes of vernacular extermination were occurring in Europe, kings in Karnataka were issuing royal records in Kannada for the core of their culture-power desì, in Telugu for the eastern sector, and in Marathi for the western,
and in their courts these kings were entertained with songs in these languages as well as Avadhi, Bihari, Bangla, Oriya, and Madhyadeshiya—producing, in fact, a virtual cosmopolitanism of the vernaculars.

What from developments in Europe might be taken as basic constituents of the vernacularization process are entirely absent from the historical experience of southern Asia. Language was most certainly of interest to court elites in southern Asia but the logic of their cultural politics was as incommensurable with that of their European contemporaries as the logic of their cosmocratic predecessors had been with that of their Latin counterparts. The nascent nation-states of Europe everywhere evinced a correlation between people, power, and culture; the vernacular polities of southern Asia instead made possible a cultural accommodation to the conditions of a realm of power on the part of those who entered it. If power had begun to express itself in the languages of Place, it never made that language instrumental to its own self-conception let alone to the existence of the citizen-subject. Just as there had been two different cosmopolitanisms, two different ways of being in the great space of culture-power—a compulsory cosmopolitanism and a voluntary one—so there were two different vernacularities, two different ways of being in the small place of culture-power—a vernacularity of necessity and one of accommodation.

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The shortcomings in the above account in point of method and conception are not hard to identify. Methodologically, the attempt to see the forest and not just the trees makes schematic reduction impossible to avoid. Conceptually, too much stress is placed on distinctions, creating a largely demonic West over against a largely angelic East, in the interest of redressing the historical imbalance. Yet this historical reconstruction does claim a certain reality. Cosmopolitan and vernacular have been real alternatives in Asia no less than in Europe; in both regions power has had as much inclination for culture as culture for power; in both, culture and power were everywhere and always produced by deliberate choices and conscious practices. Still, however comparable may have been the basic conditions of possibility across the Eurasian world during the 1,500-year period under discussion, promoting certain cultural and political changes of a comparable sort, the differences in the resultant formations were deep and irreducible. Clearly, the possibilities for making history were very various.

If attempting to know the past is difficult, and no less so than the theoretical and metatheoretical challenges this attempt must confront, equally difficult is the metapractical question why we want to know it at all. Can historical knowledge open up a domain of alternative possibilities at a time when the choices of culture-power before us seem all bad and the dilemmas in-
tolerable, yet apparently inevitable? Cosmopolitanism and vernacularism in their contemporary Western forms—American-style globalization and ethnonationalism—is one such domain of bad options. It is hard not to see their most deformed developments in the confrontations between NATO and Serbia that closed out one century of confrontation and between the United States and Afghanistan and Iraq that opened another. No simple formula can capture the complexity of these confrontations, but it may not be too far wrong to see them as pitting a threatened and at times irrational vernacularity against a new and terrible kind of imperial cosmopolitanism.

India, for its part, is hardly immune now to bad choices. The worst at present is the choice between a vernacularity mobilized along the most fragile fault lines of region, religion, and caste, and the grotesque mutation of the toxins of postcolonial resentment and modernity known as Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism. The very names of the groups that make up the institutional complex of Hindutva—including the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party) and its ideological wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council)—bespeak what had never been spoken before, postulating in the one case a single Indian “peoplehood” (janata), in the other, Hinduism as an aggressive universalism. What is immediately clear from the history we have followed in the course of this book is that Hindutva is a perversion of India’s great cosmopolitan past, while the many new subnational movements (as in Assam and elsewhere) represent an entirely new, militant vernacularism, indeed, a kind of Heideggerization of Indian life.

In thinking about the kinds of choices between the cosmopolitan and vernacular that are now available—mostly bad and bitter and sad choices—in relation to the historical past we have just surveyed, it may help to put them into a more familiar idiom by way of two brief texts Antonio Gramsci produced in the early 1920s concerning the vernacular-national and cosmopolitan-universalist problematics. Gramsci’s reflections on the large questions of literary culture and political power over the long history of the West are uncommon, innovative, and passionate, however unsuccessful he may have been in developing a coherent position about the competing claims of the cosmopolitan and the vernacular either as cultural or political values. The two small texts to be considered meditate, in their own way, on these problems.

The first of these concerns the relationship between the particular and the universal in literature. Serious people—André Gide is mentioned—believe writers are able to serve the general interest only to the degree that the work they produce is more particular. Gide himself had originally developed this idea within a purely aestheticist paradigm: one cannot promote the universal or any other good without the perfection of “artistic power, however defined,” and the latter always comes from and depends on the particular. The particular, however, for many in the 1920s, was precisely the national. The question accordingly raised here is whether being particular it-
self is necessarily a function of being national, as many conservative intellectuals insisted, including those who in 1919 asked in a public manifesto, "Is it not by nationalizing itself that a literature takes on a more universal signification, a more humanly general interest? ... Is it not profound error to believe that one can work on behalf of European culture through a de-nationalized literature?"

Here is not the place to pursue in any detail the arguments against this position, Heideggerian avant la lettre. One could certainly suggest that being rooted in a place is not what makes a "genuine" work of art flourish; rather, certain works create, or help to create, that sense of rootedness, which a posteriori consecrates those works as "genuine"—such surely is the logic taught by a history of literature that produced and canonized first the rootless Kālidāsa and then the rooted Pampa. What interests us in these reflections on the literary particular, beyond the genealogy of the idea and its remarkable implications in modern Europe—that the particular is the real general and that nationalism may "equivocate" as the true universalism—is the answer Gramsci gestures toward by noting the radical difference, as he emphatically puts it, between two modalities of particularity: being particular and preaching particularism. To express this in the terms used in this book: while vernacularity is essential for art and for life, we can and must distinguish between a vernacularity of necessity and one of accommodation, and strive somehow to achieve the latter.

In the second text, a brief comment on the past and future of the idea of the Italian nation-state, Gramsci raises the question of the universal while pursuing the same basic problem just mentioned, wondering now whether the forces that produced the unification of Italy must also inevitably produce a militaristic nationalism. He argues that such nationalism is antihistorical: "It is, in reality, contrary to all the Italian traditions, first Roman and then Catholic," which he tells us are cosmopolitan. But then, as if sensing the incompleteness of his answer, he asks the far more important question whether a new type of cosmopolitanism may ever be possible, beyond "nationalism and militaristic imperialism: Not the citizen of the world as civis romanus or as Catholic but as a producer of civilization." In other words, is it possible to be universal without preaching universalism?

The tension between the particular and the universal, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, the local and the global—not all precisely the same phenomena, to be sure, but now inextricably linked—has lost little of its urgency since Gramsci's day. It shows itself to be as pressing and intractable as ever, with new and more complex versions of vernacularity developing in response to what is perceived as cosmopolitanism in its ugly-American embodiment.

To get a sense of where we stand now, let us look briefly at two recent attempts by accomplished thinkers, inheritors of one of the historical types of vernacularism and cosmopolitanism whose genesis has been traced in the course of this book, to rehabilitate the national vernacular under a liberal or progressive guise, one by stressing culture, the other, power. By way of conclusion we can then ask whether any response to this new indigenism is available in a postcolonialism that may still bear the impress or stored energy—whatever may be the right metaphor—of those other, and very different, cosmopolitan and vernacular histories.

In a recent work on multicultural citizenship, the Canadian philosopher Will Kymlicka introduces the idea of a “societal culture” that provides its members “with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities... encompassing both public and private spheres.” Societal cultures, which turn out to differ little from national cultures, constitute the true basis of freedom. The congeries of practices termed societal cultures “did not always exist” but were produced from, among other factors, the new elevation of the vernacular (explained following the Gellnerian model). Yet in the author’s treatment this assemblage has somehow been able to escape the historicity of the nineteenth-century moment of its genesis. Vernacular cultures are simply there as givens; they demand unequivocally to be accommodated precisely as they are, unquestioned about their present let alone historical constitution. They are the only “meaningful context of choice for people” and worth preserving at all costs. Violations of the space of vernacular cultures, accordingly—through open borders, for example—would be disastrous since “people’s own national community would be overrun by settlers from other cultures”; they would as a result be unable “to ensure their survival as a distinct national culture.” “Most people” (somehow the author knows most people) “would rather be free and equal within their own nation... than be free and equal citizens of the world, if this means they are less likely to be able to live and work in their own language and culture.”

A less openly ethnocultural defense of vernacular nationalism is offered by the Scottish scholar Tom Nairn, who approaches the problem through the domain of the political. The breakup of Soviet socialism, Nairn says, buried the old internationalism of promoting working-class solidarity to counteract capitalism and nationalism. In its place has come “internationality,” the bland but dangerous homogenization of the world whose very effect is to produce local, often violent, resistance. The way forward now must be through, and not outside, nationalism, and of course through capitalism. All that is left for internationalists to decide is “what sort of nationalists they

will become." As the 1919 intellectuals would have phrased it, the only way to be universal now is to be national. As for the dangers: Well, "are the fragmentation and anarchy really so bad?" These words were written two years into the siege of Sarajevo, five years into the struggle in Kashmir, ten years into the movement for Tamil Eelam—with Rwanda one year away, Chechnya two, Srebrenica three, and the renewed Intifada and response in Israel-Palestine four. Of course these are not identical situations—and not all twentieth-century horrors, many far worse than these, can be subsumed under the extreme vernacular mobilization of nationalism. Yet each of these recent cases seems poised in its own way on the particularistic, vernacular brink, the "Ethnic Abyss," that seems increasingly resistant to Nairn's denial that "here is no abyss, in the hysterical-liberal sense."8

Kymlicka and Nairn are representative of many contemporary thinkers (not just small-country nationalists but proponents of multiculturalism, identity politics, and so forth) for whom vernacularity stands outside of history—except to the degree that history demonstrates its necessity (which it does continually)—and constitutes an essential component of human existence.

The conservation of vernacular culture and the acquisition of vernacular polity, now coterminous with nationalism, is a categorical imperative in the face of a universalism seen only as mandatory. Such a vision of the present and future is a distillate, or so it seems arguable, of convictions about autochthony reproduced throughout the history of European vernacularization under an old pressure from compulsory cosmopolitanism.

To these views we may juxtapose the perspective of those who have inherited, if not always with clear awareness of the fact, the very different traditions of the South Asian cosmopolitanism and vernacularism detailed in this book. These are legatees, in addition, of the world’s longest and most fraught engagement with globalization in its harshest form, European colonialism. The rich inventory of strong formulations about particulars and universals, especially Asian particulars and Western universals, found among these intellectuals is something one may again and reasonably take to be a kind of sedimentation of historical experience—without thereby endorsing an iron determinism—though it is no straightforward matter to assess its value. Surely getting beaten up all the time by the schoolyard bully has a way of focusing the mind on violence more than is the case for kids who have been left in peace. And while such historical experience does not convert automatically into an advantage for thought or practice, it clearly encourages a propensity for thinking. We may not be wrong to suppose, therefore, that these two powerful formative experiences—a long encounter with autonomously produced cosmopolitan and vernacular practices, followed by firsthand knowl-

8. Nairn 1996; the texts quoted are on pp. 274–76.
edge of the new and heteronymous cosmopolitanism of colonialism and its consequence, an ossified vernacularism—have inclined some thinkers to search harder, not for a unified theory of transcendence but for “cracks in the master discourses” and, more important, for practices that overcome the dichotomous thinking that marks our current impasse. 9

It is from within the world of these intellectuals that some of the more compelling suggestions are being offered on ways to address the desperate choices imposed by capitalist modernity. 10 Might it be possible to transcend the dichotomies of modernizing (and homogenizing) cosmopolitanism and traditionalizing (and rigidifying) vernacularism by understanding that the new must be made precisely through attachment to the old, and by recognizing that only such an attachment enables one to grasp what in the past can and must be changed? Take as one example the seemingly irreconcilable alternatives of the universalist discourse of the liberal state—where secularism demands the submergence of religious difference in a homogeneous juridical order—and the historical particularities of a given community’s ways of life (understanding that these are in fact historical): might this irreconcilability yield to a strategic politics that seeks to institute such a transformation from within communities themselves (whether Muslim, Vaiṣṇava, Maratha, or other), while resisting demands for liberalization or democratization that are official, top-down, imposed from the outside? In other words, affective attachment to old structures of belonging offered by vernacular particulars must precede any effective transformation through new cosmopolitan universals. Care must be in evidence: the desire to preserve even as the structure is changed. 11 Analogously, the choice between the global and the local, whether in the production of culture or in the organization of power, may find some kind of resolution in the blunt refusal to choose between the alternatives, a refusal that can be performed in practice whatever the difficulty in articulating it in theory.

Indeed, such practices can actually exist without necessarily being theorized. The Sanskrit cosmopolis offers just such an instance—another apparent anomaly of India, itself the “strangest of all possible anomalies,” as Macaulay phrased the unintended compliment. 12 Indeed, such anomalies may be precisely what is needed in a world of almost nomologically reenacted violence between the localisms and globalism of modernity: the anomaly of a universalism that does not stand in contradiction with cultural or political particularism or preach its own necessity, that knows its limits and yet has centers everywhere and circumstances nowhere; the anomaly of a ver-

9. The phrase is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s, in conversation.
10. See for example Chatterjee 1997; Nagaraj 1998; Chakrabarty 2000.
nacularism with multiple mother tongues, free of longing for language origins and people origins, and free of the conjuncture and exclusivity of language—people—place. Exhuming these anomalies as future potentialities, by decivilizing and denationalizing the Indian past where they were once lived realities, is something that might be achieved by a seriously historical account of Sanskrit in the world, one seeking not a return to roots but a “coming-to-terms with our ‘routes,’” an unsentimental and nondefensive history, and one that is not merely, pointlessly erudite.  

Might not the historical reality of such anomalies, with their different cultural-political logic where middle terms were not excluded, suggest the possibility of making the future one of And rather than Either/Or? The proclamation has the ring of a slogan, and a utopian slogan at that. And it does not mechanically yield policy outcomes, either, that would be capable of directly adjudicating today’s most pressing questions of the cosmopolitan and vernacular—the minority cultural rights that we must support, for instance, or the ethnochauvinist politics that we must resist. Yet the proposal to seek And is worth entertaining as a life practice, and it derives some pragmatic sustenance from an awareness of the varied cosmopolitan and vernacular possibilities that were available before modernity—the once-existent topoi from which utopianism can take hope, those real places and real practices of the past that show how malleable are the iron laws of culture and power. To know that some people in the past could be universal and particular in their practices of culture and power without making their particularity ineluctable or their universalism compulsory is to know that better cosmopolitan and vernacular practices are at least conceivable, and perhaps even—in a way those people themselves may never have fully achieved—eventually reconcilable.

14. In fact the formulation is taken from a German sociologist whose argument is not a precipitate of comparable historical experience but derives instead from an abstract model of risk theory (Beck 1997).