

The Modernity of Sanskrit.

By Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Pp. xi + 213.

ISBN 10: 0816649960; 13: 9780816649969.

Reviewed by Victor van Bijlert, VU University, Amsterdam

E-mail victorvanbijlert@kpnplanet.nl

doi:10.1017/S1479591409990362

Mature academic studies on Sanskrit literature are uncommon, despite the sheer volume of Sanskrit texts composed over almost three millennia and the importance of Sanskrit for Indian civilization. Simona Sawhney's thoughtful book of essays is a rare flower in an upcoming field of what one might style "Sanskrit cultural studies". The author dexterously avoids the Scylla of philological/indological pedantry and the Charybdis of Hindu chauvinism. In this, as in every other regard, Sawhney's approach to Sanskrit and its literature is ground-breaking. Especially novel about Sawhney's approach to Sanskrit is the perception that during the past two decades a "total appropriation of the Sanskrit tradition in India by the Hindu right" (p. ix), and the premise that "Sanskrit becomes a prop in the staging of a violent drama of cultural continuity, and the hatred of all those to whom both origin and history appear as a relentless saga of injustice" (p. 5). Even more poignant is her confession that her decision to learn Sanskrit "crystallized only in the aftermath of December 6, 1992 . . . the destruction of the Babri masjid . . . and the violence that both produced and followed that destruction" (p. ix). The shame and horror of the ensuing rise of the violent Hindu right forced Sawhney to take a hard look at the Sanskrit tradition, in whose name, allegedly, the Hindutva forces wished to destroy the body politic of the secular democratic republic of India.

The immediacy of an age-old tradition in these contemporary historical events accounts for the book's title. Sawhney has written it "as a way of asking how we might read Sanskrit texts today, not to present a hypothesis about how they may have been read two thousand years ago" (p. 15). Moreover, the modernity of Sanskrit refers "to the appearance and status of Sanskrit texts in modern India and to the ways in which they have contributed to reflections on literary, political, and cultural modernity" (p. 16).

Sawhney carries out her programme of the modern reading of Sanskrit across five chapters. In her first chapter she discusses readings by Rabindranath Tagore (the famous Bengali poet and Nobel prize winner) and by Buddhadeva Bose (another Bengali poet and literary critic) of, respectively, Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* and his lyrical long poem *Meghaduta*. The leading theme in both Sanskrit works is the problematic of love as either a fleeting passion or a permanent commitment. The latter is seen as an "ascetic will to power" (p. 41). The exile and separation of the *yaksha* in the *Meghaduta* elicits a discussion by Bose on separation in time and space of the modern reader from ancient India and its culture. This very separation is further analysed in Chapter 2. Sawhney shows the influence the *Meghaduta* exerted on major modern Hindi poets such as Hazariprasad Dvidevi, Dharamvir Bharati, Srikant Verma and Mohan Rakesh. The latter understood modernity as turning "one's face away from the past, toward the future" (p. 60). Here the book reveals an interesting multivalence of a single term. "Modernity", for contemporary Bengali and Hindi writers, means something like "looking forward", that is, away from the immediate traditional past. Sanskrit texts play only the role of midwife of a future modern poetry or other future literary forms. But Sawhney's "modernity" means something more sociological. Literary modernity means "avant-gardism". This seems to be the predominant meaning attached to modernity throughout the book: pp. 52, 57, 60, 61, 77–78, 142, 161–62.

The more sociological meaning of modernity, especially in a political context, forms the crux of Chapters 3 and 4, dealing as they do with the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata. The most widely read Sanskrit text in modern times is no doubt the Bhagavad Gita. And its most famous reader and protagonist in modern times is no doubt Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi claimed the Gita as his major

source of inspiration and could read the text “upside down” as it were, denying that the Gita preached violence, but instead insisting that the message of the Gita was non-violence. Sawhney shows in Chapter 3 in detail how Gandhi “radically reorients the ancient text in the name of preserving its authority” (p. 88). Gandhi read the Gita as a political activist, not as a scholar or historian or even Hindu theologian. In this role, Gandhi turned the past, the historical setting of the Gita, “into his ally”, gathering from the Gita “an authoritative resource in order to radically question the habits and desires of the present” (p. 91). For the purposes of non-violent political theory, Gandhi was interested in the “spirit” of the Gita, not in the “letter” of the historically determined actual text (p. 122). For Gandhi both the Gita and the whole of the Mahabharata epic of which it is a part, were allegorical. These tales – like all sacred scriptures – have “their true existence in a transcendent realm” (p. 121). That is why Gandhi felt he did the spirit of the text justice when he denied the actual settings of the text. For Gandhi, non-violence was the prime ethical and political imperative he could derive from the Gita, in spite of the blatant fact that the Gita was delivered on a battle-field and was taught in order to incite Arjuna to engage in combat.

The violence of the epic itself is the topic of Chapter 4. A few years after the independence of India, the Hindi poet Dharamvir Bharati wrote a play in Hindi verse entitled *Andha Yug* (The Blind Age). The play constitutes Bharati’s reading of the main story of the Mahabharata. Bharati focuses on the concept of *maryada*, meaning “limit” or “boundary”. At stake here is the boundary “between kingdoms, families, right and wrong action, justice and violence, the rulers and the ruled” (p. 133). This occasions a reflection on the porous boundaries between just wars, on one hand, and the desire for violent revenge as a repayment for past wrongs. As a journalist operating in former East Pakistan, Bharati witnessed the Bangladeshi war of liberation in 1971 and described the Bengali freedom fighters and their longing for revenge on West Pakistan, ultimately writing that he hoped for victory for the Bangladeshi side (p. 144). The Mahabharata and its violent intrigues lurched in the background. Sawhney explains: “Bharati’s writings show us . . . the *Mahabharata*’s appeal for (Hindu) Indians . . . a widespread fantasy of forming a victorious army against . . . ‘illegitimate’ rulers . . . Britain and Pakistan” (p. 153). Again the dividing-line between just war and gory revenge is thin; there is thus a constant ambiguity even in the Mahabharata itself with regard to violence, the justification of its use and a moral order that would condemn violence for the sake of mere personal revenge.

In her final chapter Sawhney returns to literary theory and hence implicitly to avant-gardist literary modernity. First she shows the variegated judgements on classical Sanskrit poetry and poetical theories. Buddhadeva Bose is discussed again, this time with regard to his opinion that Sanskrit poetry lacks “truly personal utterance” and “seem[s] curiously stilted and unappealing to modern readers” (p. 162). Hindi poet Ram Chandra Shukla brought forward the thesis that poetry is a cure for inherent human isolation, and that poetry is meant for more than expressing and communicating pleasure. Shukla holds up Valmiki (the alleged author of the Ramayana) and Kalidasa as good examples for his own Hindi-writing contemporaries (p. 166). Jaishankar Prasad, by contrast, argues that Sanskrit poetry did not commit the Western mistake of associating poetry with art. Instead poetry is to be regarded as a form of knowledge, *vidya* (pp. 169–70). Prasad further argues that the Christian West posits a dichotomy between the inferior human world of the flesh and the purity of spirit of God’s heaven. Thus the West can “see” beauty bereft of tangible shape. In Indian poetic tradition this dichotomy between flesh and spirit, according to Prasad, does *not* exist. Therefore Sanskrit poetry “is engaged in constantly disclosing the ever-new mystery of the experience-perceptions (*anubhuti*) of the soul” (p. 172). Because Prasad maintained that Europe “has missed, as it were, the essence of poetry”, Sawhney is of the opinion that Prasad is thus “provincializing Europe” (p. 173). Europe cannot lay claim to universality, but rather is limited in its vision.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the ninth-century theoretician of Sanskrit poetics, Anandavardhana. Sawhney sees in Anandavardhana a Sanskrit author with an essentially modern

theory of poetics. Anandavardhana is well known for his idea that the essence of poetry is *dhvani*, “suggested meaning”. The novelty and originality of poetry lies in the multiple suggestions that poetic composition can convey. Multiple meaning is possible because speech – including Sanskrit speech – is conditioned by “context, by place, time, and other limits, and can hence never be a guarantee of its own truth” (p. 181). According to Sawhney, Anandavardhana’s theory of *dhvani* “enables both the objects of the world and human language to acquire new dimensions” (p. 182). His genius lay in turning “finitude into a means for ensuring the future of poetry . . . because the realm of truth or absolute literality remains beyond human language” (p. 182). Sawhney sees in “suggestiveness” the “soul” of poetry (p. 182). In this way, Anandavardhana contributed to a modern understanding of poetry and even of modern Indian culture.

The richness of argument and detail of this book could make us forget that some of its points invite further analysis. The book is written in English. This fact ensures that its arguments are accessible to a global audience, but the English language – and with it the modern Western cultural context – obscures certain conspicuous differences between modern culture and ancient Indian/Sanskrit culture. One needs, for example, a hypothesis about how the texts were read some two thousand years ago, something Sawhney did not want her study to do (cf. p. 15). A critical difference has to do with the concept of time. Modern time – to put it bluntly – is linear. Under such a conception, the events of history cannot ever be repeated; rather, linear time has to do with what is unique. The universe of most of the Sanskrit texts that Sawhney discusses – Bhagavad Gita, Meghaduta, Uttaramacharita, Ramayana – moves in the cyclical time of karma, rebirth, and regular cosmic eras. This is a fundamental gap that no amount of “modern” reading of Sanskrit texts can ever bridge. Consequently, the modern reader must get acquainted with the cyclical time universe of Sanskrit culture. Modern reading of Sanskrit texts must accommodate the cyclical time schema with the modern concept of linear time. Of course, a counter-argument might be raised that the universe of cyclical time is the universe of the Brahmanical hierarchical social world order, and as such is not the complete picture. There is a sphere of world renunciation wherein the cycles of rebirth, ritual obligations and karma are transcended to a sphere that knows mostly linear time.

This point begs another question: Sawhney does not distinguish types of Sanskrit texts, nor among the social contexts of these texts. The two time universes correspond with the two spheres of ancient Hinduism: the social order (governed by cyclical time) and the renunciation of the world (aiming at linear time). Sawhney does not go into the question of why certain Sanskrit texts speak better to a modern audience than others, for example why Sanskrit poetry remains relatively unpopular, whereas a text like the Bhagavad Gita has acquired worldwide fame and a global readership. One possible answer readily suggests itself. The Gita’s main doctrine of liberation is based on a blend of the two spheres of social order and renunciation. The Gita speaks both for “cyclical time” tradition and “linear time” renunciation – therefore also for modernity. This is probably why the Gita was such an effective instrument of early anti-colonial nationalism and could be used by Gandhi for the same purpose.

One last small point: on p. 187 Sawhney refers several times to Ch. Vaudeville as “his” and “he”; but Vaudeville’s first name is Charlotte, so she certainly is no gentleman.

Sawhney’s book should be required reading for indologists, as well as students of Sanskrit and Hindi. Furthermore, one hopes that her book will reach the hands of Indian and Western social scientists who work on India. Sawhney demonstrates that one can be both an (Indian) scholar of Sanskrit and a non-sectarian secularist at the same time. Studying Sanskrit does not always imply links with Hindu extreme right.