

Enter Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna,* Pāṇḍava-s awaited

Boldly strong, *The Battle for Sanskrit* is an effective war cry

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Abstract

Despite its neglect by scholars in the Western academic world, Rajiv Malhotra's recent bestselling¹ and impactive² book *The Battle for Sanskrit* (TBFS)³ succeeds in its objective and will resonate with its target readers: traditional Sanskrit scholars in India as well as English-speaking right-leaning Hindus across the world.⁴ Malhotra raises hard questions and presents grim facts in lucid vocabulary and a style which is a combination of academic, critical, trenchant, and motivational. He summarizes debatable and objectionable views and theories of Sheldon Pollock and what he calls 'American Orientalism';⁵ offers counter-views and alternate theories; and exhorts traditional Sanskrit scholars to critique Pollock's works, views, and theories more substantially. In this article, I present a detailed review of the book and highlight what in my opinion are the strengths and weaknesses of the book. Although I have a favourable opinion of Malhotra's book, I hope the contents of the article will prove useful, for the purpose of discussions and debates around the issues raised in the book, to even readers who are neutral or opposed to Malhotra's views. In addition to an appendix on proofreading errors in TBFS, the article includes two more appendixes—one critiquing Pollock's claim of an instance of semantic inversion and another analyzing contents of a recent statement that Pollock signed.

Keywords: The Battle for Sanskrit, Rajiv Malhotra, Sheldon Pollock, Sanskrit, Indian studies.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, all cited page numbers refer to **Rajiv Malhotra (2016)**.

*The name *Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna* is an exocentric compound (*bahuvrihi samāsa*) parsed as *dhr̥ṣṭam pragalbham dyumnaṃ balaṃ yasya*. It means 'he whose strength is bold or daring', i.e. 'boldly strong'.

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¹Every time I have checked its Amazon India page, the book has been among the top ten category bestsellers.

²More on this in the [Release and Impact](#) section on page 19.

³**Rajiv Malhotra (2016)**.

⁴Malhotra is correct in saying 'Hindus with a sense of sacredness turn to my work with interest' (p. 312).

⁵While Malhotra may be the first to use this term in the context of Indian studies, it has been used earlier by at least two US academics: Douglas Little (*American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, I. B. Tauris, 2003) and Mari Yoshihara (*Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, OUP, 2002).

1 Organization

Excluding the introduction, TBFS has eleven chapters and five appendixes in addition to notes, bibliography, and a short but useful index. The introduction begins with Malhotra's narrative of the story behind the book. The author discusses at some length the proposed Adi Shankara Chair in Hindu Religion and Philosophy and his efforts to convince the sponsors that it would be a risky venture. With hidden names and bold claims, just as the reader begins to wonder if this was all true, comes a surprise twist after twelve pages: Malhotra's description of his meeting with ... guess, who ... Sheldon Pollock. By the eighteenth page, the story behind the book is over and in another ten pages Malhotra summarizes the main issues raised in the book.

The first two chapters offer light reading and readers can skim through the section on European Orientalism in the second chapter. The focus on Pollock begins in the middle of the second chapter, when he is introduced as a worthy opponent, 'the very best mind' of a school of thought. His 'impressive career' and importance are highlighted by Malhotra before presenting a summary of his views.

Chapters three to seven and chapter nine focus on specific themes across Pollock's oeuvre. They can be read in any order without much of a break in continuity. Pollock's interpretations, views, and theories are summarized, critiqued, and are occasionally compared with or traced to works of previous authors. Malhotra shows that Pollock's writings aim to separate Sanskrit from Hinduism and unfairly portray a negative image of Sanskrit texts. Malhotra criticizes Pollock's approach by asserting that he is guilty of sweeping assumptions, reasoning with farcical implications, outdated and crude Freudian readings, unconscious projections, reductionist speculations, and fallacies like mapping a dead Latin text to a living Hindu one. Malhotra contradicts Pollock by quoting interpretations and views of a wide range of scholars—Ananda Coomaraswamy, Ashok Aklujkar, K. S. Kannan, Arvind Sharma, Chamu Krishna Shastry, Reinhold Grünendahl, Robert Goldman, T. S. Satyanath, K. M. Pannikar,⁶ and the authors of the [First] Sanskrit Commission Report. In the ninth chapter, Malhotra highlights important aspects of Jürgen Hanneder's criticisms of Pollock's approach and conclusions in the paper *The Death of Sanskrit*: use of arbitrary evidence, lack of consideration of other options, selective use of data, result of necessities of argumentation (rather than evidence), and a fundamental cultural misunderstanding. At many places, Malhotra offers his own interpretations and views, including a speculative reinterpretation of *varṇa* for today as well as some theistic and transcendental points of view.

In the eighth chapter, the shortest in the book, Malhotra speculates on an alternative model for the evolution of languages and presents views of Satyanath. I found it to be light reading, as it does not have the intensity which other chapters have. Some readers may want to read

⁶I would like to emphasize (in a footnote) the statement of Pannikar that Malhotra emphasizes (in italics) on page 290: 'It is necessary to emphasize that it is only out of ignorance that people call Sanskrit a dead language.'

the chapter later or even skip it.

In the tenth chapter (*Is Sheldon Pollock Too Big to Be Criticized?*), TBFS reaches a crescendo. Malhotra is the most forceful here, as he expands his target from Pollock to the larger ecosystem around Pollock. He starts by saying that Pollock has a goal of transforming Indian society which as per Pollock abounds in sorrow. Malhotra offers stinging criticism of a wide range of topics including some of Pollock's highly objectionable views (especially those on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*), similar views held by several other academics (Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph,⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot, Wendy Doniger, Ananya Vajpeyi, Girish Karnad, etc.), the over-enthusiastic praise of Pollock by media outlets like *Tehelka* and *India Abroad*, course materials for US schools, people behind the controversial and offensive film *Sita Sings the Blues* (Nina Paley and Aseem Chhabra), etc. The target reader gets the impression that Malhotra, like the brave Abhimanyu, is fighting single-handedly against many opponents simultaneously. In the last section of the chapter, Malhotra uses Pollock's theories to interpret Pollock's own works and arrives at some hilarious conclusions, implying that the theories are not broadly applicable.

The concluding chapter is light reading again and can be skimmed through. Malhotra offers ideas on how to respond to the issues he has raised in the book. After proposing eighteen tasks, he concedes that he is 'far from being the most qualified person to take on these tasks'. Malhotra ends the book by saying his desired outcome would be a genuine public debate between traditional scholars of Sanskrit and scholars like Pollock.

2 Review

Any careful reader of modern literature on Sanskrit by both traditional Sanskrit scholars, writing mostly in Indian languages and sometimes in English, and contemporary liberal Indologists like Pollock, writing almost entirely in English, will note a stark contrast between the broad narratives. In the traditional narrative, Sanskrit represents India's golden past.⁸ In the liberal narrative, it represents India's dark past.⁹ The liberal narrative on Sanskrit more than dominates the traditional narrative not only in Western academia but also in the Indian English mainstream media and the increasingly Westernized Indian popular culture. Balancing this lop-sided discourse requires the upholders of the traditional narrative to counter the liberal narrative in addition to sufficiently representing the traditional narrative in Western academia, mainstream media, and Indian popular culture. This difficult task requires a significant number of traditional Sanskrit scholars and right-leaning learners of Sanskrit to step forward. Rajiv Malhotra's TBFS is an attempt to motivate such people and inspire the emergence of a

⁷Both of them passed away recently, Susanne in December 2015 and Lloyd in January 2016.

⁸See for example the book *The Wonder that is Sanskrit* (ISBN 9788192022123) by Sampadananda Mishra and Vijay Poddar.

⁹See for example the [opinionated] opinion piece 'The story of my Sanskrit' (2014) by Ananya Vajpeyi in *The Hindu*, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

‘traditional camp’, or what he calls the ‘home team’. The book is more a motivational book than an academic one.¹⁰

The goals of TBFS, as stated by the author, are to bridge the knowledge gap in traditional Indian scholars, raise awareness about the need for a debate, and highlight debatable views (‘red flags’) for the purpose of starting debates around them and inspiring the ‘home team’ to investigate them. Malhotra says that the book is a preliminary beginning in this direction and is partly intended to be a ‘wake-up call for insiders, to force them out of their slumber and isolation’. The focus on Sheldon Pollock is a good means for Malhotra to achieve this. While the book may not be as effective in bridging the knowledge gap, it certainly succeeds in drawing attention to the ‘red flags’ and serves as a forceful and effective wake-up call for the target readers (traditional Sanskrit scholars and English-speaking right-leaning Hindus).

Malhotra’s ‘red flags’—aspects of Pollock’s work which the target reader would find debatable, objectionable, or even appalling—are meticulously chosen around popular texts like *Rāmāyaṇa* to have the maximum impact: the target reader is in for a rude awakening. For example, Pollock’s assertions that Rāma has no choice in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* and is erroneously seen as a hero are debatable for a traditional scholar of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *sāhitya*.¹¹ Pollock’s biased or extreme views like the *Rāmāyaṇa* is primarily a text of ‘othering’ whose principle objective is the consolidation of *rāja-dharma* or the king’s political power; the *Mahābhārata* is a ‘dangerous mythic formation’ or ‘the most dangerous political story’; and these texts are filled with various social ‘toxins’ (barbarism, inequality, misogyny, oppression, othering, etc.) which influenced European racist biases and fascism would be objected to by a traditional Sanskrit scholar who would see these views as emanating from a jaundiced reading of texts full of human values. Pollock’s politically loaded speculation that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has served as a code in which ‘proto-communalist relations could be activated’ or the questionable application of modern theories like psychoanalysis to conclude that the ‘other’ in the *Rāmāyaṇa* represents all that traditional Indians most desire and most fear would shock the right-leaning Hindu.¹² With such carefully chosen ‘red flags’, Malhotra convinces his target reader that the liberal narrative does not see Sanskrit texts and Hinduism in a positive light. The author adds insult to injury when he states that the liberal narrative not only blames Sanskrit texts and Hinduism for oppression of socially

¹⁰Malhotra himself says in the last paragraph of Appendix E (p. 404) that the book is not intended to be an academic book in the conventional sense.

¹¹Rāma in Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* is a *dhīrodātta nāyaka* (*avikatthanaḥ kṣamāvānatigambhiro mahāsattvaḥ, stheyān nigūḍhamāno dhīrodātto dr̥ghavrataḥ kathitaḥ ... yathā rāmayudhiṣṭhirādīḥ, Sāhityadarpaṇa*, 3.32), and his words on *daiva* are to be seen in this context. When Lakṣmaṇa, who forcefully asserts the superiority of *puruṣārtha* over *daiva*, asks Rāma to order him, Rāma’s response refers not to *daiva* or *puruṣārtha*, but only to the righteous way (*satpatha*) of obeying the words of *pitṛdeva*: *uvāca pitrorvacane (pitrye vacane) vyavasthitaṃ nibodha māmeṣa hi saumya satpathe* (2.22.41). This shows Rāma is making a conscious choice of following *pitṛdharma*. See also Vinod Bala Arun’s Hindi work *Rāmakathā me Naitika Mūlya* (2015, Prabhat Prakashan, New Delhi, ISBN 978-93-5186-184-3, p. 323) for the insightful view that Rāma acknowledges *daiva* but believes in *puruṣārtha* as well.

¹²As would Pollock’s statement that Śūrpaṇakhā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* represents the ‘succubus of Indian male’s nightmare world’.

disadvantaged communities, but fails to recognize the oppression of India under Islamic and British rule. The result is not just an informed target reader but an informed and agitated target reader, woken from deep slumber and more likely to respond to Malhotra's call.

Another theme that Malhotra effectively highlights in TBFS is Pollock's obsession with politics and power in Sanskrit works. Malhotra uses the frequency counts for the words 'politics', 'power', and '*praśasti*' in *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* to emphasize this. I believe a word cloud of the book would have revealed some more overall 'patterns' in Pollock's work.¹³ To counter Pollock's view that the site, patronage, and glory of *kāvya* was undoubtedly always the royal court, Malhotra provides some valid examples of non-political *kāvya*-s including *bhaktikāvya*-s, to which *stotrakāvya*-s like *Pādukāśahasra* can be added.¹⁴ Another notable example is the *Śrīmadbhāgavata* which is as much a *kāvya* as a *śāstra*, owing to its highly poetic style and aesthetic qualities.¹⁵ A verse in the *Śrīmadbhāgavata* criticizes poets (or wise men) who serve the rich,¹⁶ showing that there was also a tradition in *kāvya* which disapproved of poets serving rich kings. While his summary that Pāṇini and Patañjali worked under direction of kings may not exactly be Pollock's implication, Malhotra is correct in saying that Xuangzang's seventh-century account of a legend about Pāṇini is flimsy evidence.¹⁷

Malhotra has also succeeded in delineating Pollock's political views and political activism as well as the use of his writings for political purposes. Be it the evidence-backed assertion that Pollock's writings are used by Indian leftists with whom he forms a 'symbiotic pair';¹⁸ quoting Pollock at his unreasonable best where he calls the right-leaning promoters of Sanskrit and spoken Sanskrit as 'alphabet soup', 'appropriators', 'reactionary', 'communist', 'indigenist', guilty of 'criminal attempt', and 'nauseating';¹⁹ emphasizing his citation from an unnamed

¹³The frequency count is most likely from the digital text of the book, from which a word cloud comparing these words with other frequently used words can be easily generated. Adam Hammond in *Literature in the Digital Age: A Critical Introduction* (ISBN 9781107041905, pp. 93–94) shows, with an example of *Pride and Prejudice*, how a word cloud can reveal visions of a text not accessible to usual ways of reading.

¹⁴Hanneder's reasoning, presented by Malhotra on page 302, on why Pollock does not see *stotra* as a valid genre is food for thought. Malhotra has found good ammunition, which he employs over five pages (300–304), in Hanneder's paper which strongly criticizes the approach and views in Pollock's paper on the so-called 'death' of Sanskrit. A Google Scholar search on April 30 2016 showed that while Pollock's paper is cited by 79 papers, the one by Hanneder is cited by only eight. Malhotra is to be credited for introducing Hanneder's response to a wide audience (including me), and also for highlighting that Hanneder is no friend of the Hindu right. I recommend reading both the original papers by Pollock and Hanneder.

¹⁵As exemplified by the *Rāsapañcādhyāyī* and the various *gīta*-s (*Veṅugīta*, *Gopigīta*, *Yugalagīta*, *Bhramaragīta*, etc.) in the tenth *skandha*.

¹⁶*cīrāṇi kiṃ pathi na santi diśanti bhikṣāṃ naivāṅghripāḥ parabhṛtaḥ sarito'pyaśuṣyan, ruddhā guhāḥ kimajito'vati nopasannān kasmādbhajanti kavayo dhanadurmadāndhān* (2.2.5).

¹⁷Another legend about Pāṇini as it finds place in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* has an academic debate between students of Varṣa and a divine intervention as the reason behind the destruction of the *Aindra* school of grammar and Pāṇini's system prevailing (*Kathāsaritsāgara*, 1.4.20–25). This legend does not show any 'salience of linkage for the tradition' that Pollock finds in Xuangzang's account.

¹⁸Malhotra rightly asks if this case is any different from Pollock's own theory that the *kāvya* of the Brahmins was used by kings for political purposes.

¹⁹Pollock's target is organizations like Samskrita Bharati. Samskrita Bharati promotes spoken Sanskrit, publishes *Sambhāṣaṇa-sandēśaḥ* (the largest circulating Sanskrit magazine in the world), and has published books by eminent

Dalit manifesto; bringing up the Ambedkar Sanskrit Fellowship Program;²⁰ calling his vitriolic criticism of Indian cultural and religious nationalism as political agenda;²¹ or mentioning his allegation that the *Rāmāyaṇa* functioned as an ‘instrument of violence’ in the Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad in the early 1990s²²—Malhotra selects emotive examples to reveal the political side of Pollock and succeeds in convincing right-leaning readers that these one-sided and extreme leftist views are to be countered. Malhotra shows that Pollock finds a problem with even the very names of BJP and VHP. At places like these, Pollock clearly goes too far; so far that even Sanskrit grammar and Hindi usage are sacrificed to mistranslate *janatā* as ‘peoplehood’²³ and it is said that the name of BJP speaks something that has never been spoken before.²⁴

TBFS puts a spotlight on Hinduphobia, which is welcome since the academic discourse on Hinduphobia is nowhere close to that on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.²⁵ Why are Hindus seen as soft targets in the West for creative freedom but Christians, Muslims, and Jews are not? It is shocking to read that young students are made to recite a Hinduphobic song by an unnamed untouchable and compose their own responses addressed to the Hindu God Rāma. What would happen if the school students were also made to recite the poems of Abu Afak and Aṣmā bint Marwān on the Islamic prophet Muhammad and compose their own responses

scholars such as Pushpa Dikshit. Pollock’s only problem appears to be that such organizations are affiliated to the RSS. Malhotra is spot on in saying that Pollock is ‘using Hindu identity politics as an effigy to make a sweeping case against the efforts to promote Sanskrit’s viability as a spoken language’ (p. 274).

²⁰As per its official website, the programme supports graduate work in Sanskrit studies for students from historically disadvantaged communities. However, as per an Indian Express report in 2009 ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016) as well as an email sent by Pollock to Radha Vallabh Tripathi that was forwarded to the *bvparishat* list ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016), the aid was planned for Dalits alone: not for Pasmānda (Arzal) Muslims, indigenous Americans, African Americans, Australian Aborigines, etc. The informed reader will realize that an eligible Dalit candidate would most likely have already been helped by affirmative action in India at undergraduate level and would have been on a level playing field for three or four years, i.e. no longer disadvantaged.

²¹Is it not double standards when an author like Pollock calls irrational right-wing views of Sanskrit as ‘Hindutva fantasy (and fraud)’ promulgating ‘distorted images of India’s past’ or a ‘perversion of India’s great cosmopolitan past’, but views equally irrational left-wing views of *śāstra* in an unnamed Dalit manifesto as revealing a glimpse of an ‘actualization in consciousness’ and ‘continued vigour’ of ‘Sanskrit discourses of power’? I wonder if any actualizations in consciousness can be read in Kancha Ilaiah’s absurd statements like vegetarianism destroys brain capacity and his brain works because he ate a lot of goat brain as a child ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016).

²²Despite the fact that more than half of the victims of the December 1990 Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad were Hindus, as reported by Hindustan Times ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016), Pollock saw the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an instrument of violence but not the *Quran*. How fair!

²³The name ‘Bharatiya Janata Party’ means ‘the party of Indian people’ and not ‘the party of the Indian peoplehood’. The word *janatā* here, as used in Hindi elsewhere, stands for ‘a collection of people’ and not for the idea or sense of a single ‘peoplehood’. Even in Sanskrit the primary meaning of the word *janatā* is the same (*janānām samūhaḥ janatā*) with the affix *tal* in *janatā* coming from the Pāṇinian rule *grāmajanabandhusahāyebhyastal* (A 4.2.43). Pollock seems to think that the suffix *tal* is from the rule *tasya bhāvastvatalau* (A 5.1.119) in the sense of an abstract noun. While the *Vācaspatya* does list *janatvañca* as the unattested second meaning of *janatā*, the word is rarely used in this sense in Sanskrit, and I have never come across its use in this sense in Hindi.

²⁴Much before the words *bhāratīya janatā* in the name BJP, the collective feeling of Indian people found expression in the very first words of the *uddeśikā* (preamble) of the Constitution of India in Hindi: *hama, bhārata ke loga,* See *Bhārata kā Saṃvidhāna [9 Navambara, 2015 ko Yathāvidyamāna]*, New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice (Government of India), [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

²⁵A Google Books search on April 30 2016 for ‘anti-Semitism’ returned around 548,000 results; that for ‘Islamophobia’ 63,400 results; and one for ‘Hinduphobia’ only 750.

addressed to Muhammad? Why is Nina Paley²⁶ acclaimed all around for speaking up for women by caricaturing what is sacred to Hindus, but the anonymous creator of the *Jesus and Mo* webcomic²⁷ not awarded for speaking up for homosexuals and atheists by caricaturing what is sacred to Christians and Muslims?

Some other relevant questions and issues are raised in the book. Did Indianism in India really come into being through inputs from the West around the third century BCE, as Pollock says, or was there an idea of India before that, as exemplified by the title of Megasthenes' work *Indica* from the fourth or third century BCE?²⁸ Did the Mughal rule which imposed Persian as the administrative and court language have no contribution to the decay and disappearance of Sanskrit? Why does Pollock view the concepts of 'Indian civilization' and 'Indian culture' as 'conjured up' and 'arbitrary moments illegitimately generalized'? When Pollock calls the private sector 'enlightened', is it a *praśasti* as Malhotra says or the fulfilment of occupational obligations by a professor whose work and sometimes even official title depends on the most recent donor.²⁹ These are questions that would motivate many readers to think and read further. The *Spotlight on Ramayana: An Enduring Tradition* is criticized by Malhotra for following Pollock's interpretation and analysis and concluding that Brahmins made Rāma into a God in the sixteenth century to make the *Rāmāyaṇa* relevant for the new times under Moghul rule.³⁰ The left-leaning media also comes in for criticism. Malhotra states that the media is too kind to Pollock and positions him as if he is the only authority on Sanskrit left in the absence of Sanskrit pandits. Indeed, the cited extracts from the article on Pollock in *India Abroad* (owned by rediff.com) go overboard by saying things like Pollock's sweetly-spoken Sanskrit is probably the 'best across two hemispheres',³¹ completely ignoring the numerous *pada-vākya-pramāṇa-pārāvāriṇa-s*, *vaiyākaraṇa-s*, *mahākavi-s*, and *āśukavi-s*³² found in India even today. Malhotra

²⁶Whose animated film as per Malhotra is a mix of 'Pollock-style allegations' and her own autobiography.

²⁷Mohammed Jones is the pseudonym of the creator behind *Jesus and Mo*. He was once interviewed by Jeremy Paxman on BBC's *Newsnight* in 2014, but his face and voice were masked.

²⁸Megasthenes' *Indica* (Ἰνδική) survives only as fragments in later works, including a work of the same name by Arrian.

²⁹Formerly the general editor of the Clay Sanskrit Library funded by the late investment banker John P. Clay, Pollock is now general editor of the Murty Classical Library of India funded by Rohan Murty. Pollock's title at the University of Chicago was *George V. Bobrinsky Distinguished Service Professor of Sanskrit and Indic Studies*. At Columbia University, he was earlier *William B. Ransford Professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies* and is now the *Arvind Raghunathan Professor of South Asian Studies*. While George V. Bobrinsky was a Sanskrit scholar, Arvind Raghunathan is a hedge fund manager. I am not sure of William B. Ransford, he is/was likely a rich donor given that several chairs in Columbia University are named after him.

³⁰While I could not check the context as the citation in endnote 32 on page 450 is missing the page number, Malhotra correctly concludes that the reference is to the *Rāmacaritamānasa* (composed in the 1570s) which is to Hindus in Northern India what the Bible is to Christians. Any scholar of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition would know that the divinization of Rāma in the *Rāmacaritamānasa* is not new and is found in much older works in Sanskrit and other Indian languages. In fact, Rāma is shown to be divine in some verses in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* also.

³¹While Malhotra does not note this, this adulation is by Vaihayasi Pande Daniel. Her leftist leanings are clear from her 1999 article 'Why I am ashamed of being a Hindu' ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016) in which she calls on the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to resign for criminal acts of some Hindus so that she could be a proud Hindu again. I doubt if Daniel knows any Sanskrit at all.

³²Including some who are capable of miraculous feats like *ghaṭikāśataka*, *aṣṭavadhāna*, and *śatāvadhāna*.

proposes Sanskritization of Hindi, which has happened to quite some extent in Hindi journals and newspapers, as an option worth exploring: this option will get support of numerous Hindi lovers and even Sanskrit scholars.

At some places, Malhotra's ideas or suggestions are impractical. For example, it is a bit too much to expect a chair professor on Hinduism in Western academia to be an active disciple of a guru and have a traditional lifestyle. Similarly, writing new *itihāsa*-s or *smṛti*-s in Sanskrit may not serve much purpose, and all leaders or teachers of Hindu religious institutions and movements cannot be expected to understand and debate Islam and Christianity. At several places Malhotra is in error, for example he ignores works like *Satyārtha Prakāśa* and *Vedārtha-pārijātaḥ* when he asks why Hindu leaders failed to do 'purva-paksha of Islam, Christianity and Western secular thought'. However, such impractical suggestions or errors do not take anything away from the broader narrative of the book and the burning issues Malhotra has raised therein. A right-leaning reader like me cannot help but admire the courage of Malhotra to single-handedly take on a leading academic, raise relevant issues, highlight 'nauseating' ³³ views and interpretations, and propose solutions—despite 'far from being the most qualified person to take on these tasks at hand'. The reader is inspired when Malhotra says he carried out the work because 'nobody else did'.

3 Strengths of the book

3.1 Hard-hitting

TBFS is direct and uncompromising in presenting unpleasant facts, offering harsh criticisms, and raising difficult questions. Some of these facts, criticisms, and questions may have been raised earlier by others, but there is a marked difference in effect when an influential person like Malhotra raises them. Rightly observing that many Hindu intellectuals have views like 'it does not matter what anyone teaches' and 'the absolute truth cannot be overturned by false claims', he asks the hard question that if it were indeed so, what was the need for Ādi Śāṅkara to travel widely and debate extensively (p. 12). He is blunt in telling Pollock that scholars considered Islamophobic 'spend their entire lives studying Islam' (p. 14) and in stating that there is a need to define a level playing field to characterize a work as Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, Hinduphobia, etc. (p. 378). He criticizes India's 'leftist elites' as displaying 'snobbish intellectualism disconnected from Indian roots' and further adds that there is "a sort of 'anti-home team' inside our own society" (p. 367).

Some of the incisive criticism in TBFS is directed at traditional scholars and modern Hindus. Examples include statements like scholars using the insider lens 'shy away from defending their

³³This word is inspired from Pollock's quote: 'The whole spoken Sanskrit movement fills me with a kind of nausea.' Many of Pollock's views would similarly fill many Sanskrit scholars in India with nausea.

tradition' while those with the outsider lens are 'highly vocal and public' (p. 32), traditional Sanskrit scholars are 'completely unprepared' for the most part to tackle the issues raised (p. 44), modern Hindus 'lack even a rudimentary understanding of the Sanskrit tradition' (p. 46), Indian scholars are 'complicit in fostering atrocity literature against their own civilization' by not adequately objecting to the 'common Western images of India' (p. 68), traditionalists have adopted a 'head-in-the-sand posture' (p. 78),³⁴ the lack of 'thoughtful responses by our traditional scholars' troubles him more than Pollock's criticisms (p. 93), many pandits have betrayed tradition because of better personal opportunities (p. 305), many Hindu American children come out of US school systems as 'self-hating individuals with low self-esteem' (p. 340), and there is a need for traditional Sanskrit scholars to 'wake up from their hibernation' (p. 363). On page 342, Malhotra hits traditional Sanskrit scholars by agreeing with³⁵ Pollock's grim assertion: 'India is about to become the only major world culture whose literary patrimony, and indeed history, are in the custodianship of scholars outside the country.' Pollock's statement and Malhotra's agreement to it will certainly send chills down the spine of many an Indian reader. When Malhotra states that Columbus is no longer celebrated as a hero in many parts of America (p. 67), the target reader is unconsciously hit and may wonder at some point in future why Francis Xavier, on whose request the Goa Inquisition was installed, is considered a hero in India with numerous schools and colleges named after him.

As almost everybody who has heard of TBFS knows, there is abundant criticism of Pollock's approach, views, and theories in TBFS. Malhotra says Pollock is blind to 'his own dependence on Western thought and his radical distortion of Indian traditions by deleting the sacredness' (p. 176), the effect of his work is not to empower some communities but 'disempower Indians by subverting their sacred traditions' (p. 177), his explicit focus on social aspects 'signals his political approach' (p. 183), his work has the effect of 'demonizing opponents like me' while 'granting himself and his cohorts a kind of divine right' (p. 201), he reduces the entire process of cultural evolution to a matter of politics (p. 233), and his theory on vernacularization has nothing except pure ideology (p. 253). After presenting a contrast between Pollock's views and those expressed by the [First] Sanskrit Commission, Malhotra says that Pollock's views are largely developed sitting in a library, while the Commission conducted extensive field surveys across India (p. 291) and criticized the historical method, used by Pollock, as 'liable to degenerate into a superficial antiquarian attitude' (p. 299).

³⁴I guess this would be the *Prasārita Pādottānāsana* as described in Rama Jyoti Vernon's *Yoga: The Practice of Myth and Sacred Geometry* (ISBN 9780940676268, p. 167).

³⁵And going much further later.

3.2 Fair to the opponent

Throughout TBFS, Malhotra is extremely critical of Pollock's approach and views. However, I did not find the work to be rude or disrespectful towards Pollock. Malhotra praises Pollock at many places in the book, describing him as 'charming' (p. 13), 'remarkably well informed about Sanskrit and sanskriti' (p. 17), one of the 'very best minds' and 'foremost contemporary exponent' of 'American Orientalism' (p. 79),³⁶ and 'arguably the hardest working and most influential Western Indologist I am aware of today' (p. 93). Malhotra writes he has developed 'a deeper appreciation for his sincerity in pursuing his work on India' (p. 92) in his multiple personal meetings with Pollock. On rare occasions, Malhotra even agrees with Pollock, for example on the decline of Sanskrit in the Nehruvian era after India's independence (p. 292).

Malhotra emphasizes several times that he is calling for a friendly exchange with his opponents, and discourages personal attacks: e.g. 'I do not desire my criticisms in this book to silence those who criticize our tradition' (p. 20), 'I wish to entertain no acrimony in this disagreement' (p. 27), and 'the scenario I dread the most is some overemotional Hindus launch personal attacks on Sheldon Pollock or his coterie rather than join in a serious intellectual exchange' (p. 379). He acknowledges that he could read 'only a subset of Pollock's vast corpus of work' (p. 49) and that his conclusions may need to be 'counterbalanced by his other writings' (p. 49). This benefit of doubt is given to Pollock elsewhere too (p. 176, and also p. 281). While Malhotra lucidly summarizes some of Pollock's claims (pp. 223–226), he is quick to concede that he may 'run the risk of oversimplification or inaccuracy' (p. 223). There is also fairness in Malhotra's second category for issues he has raised in the book which is 'my interpretation of their position deemed flawed' (p. 27). Such displays of respect towards Pollock and fairness are commendable and may especially be appreciated by neutral readers and analysts.

3.3 Humour, irony, and sarcasm

Not adhering to a strictly academic writing style allows Malhotra the luxury of using humour, irony, and sarcasm for enhanced effects. There are occasional doses of [mostly harmless] humour in TBFS which will light up both Malhotra's target audience and neutral readers. Humorous quips are not new to Malhotra: one of his first widely read online articles was titled 'RISA Lila-1', a humorous take on the word *rāsālilā* which quite effectively turned around the pejorative use of the term.³⁷ Across chapters, in the midst of some very serious discussions,

³⁶Contrast this with Malhotra's self-description as 'I am far from being the most qualified person to take on these tasks at hand' (p. 378).

³⁷Traditional Hindus consider the concept of *rāsālilā* to be sacred, while the word is used in a pejorative or derogatory sense in the Westernized Indian popular culture. A song in the Bollywood movie *Ready* (2011) was in controversy for using the word and a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed over it (Salman's 'Character Dheela' hurts Hindu sentiments, June 22 2011, *Zee News*, [link](#) accessed May 3 2016). Malhotra often talks of 'reversing the gaze', he has a knack of reversing the jokes too.

Malhotra delivers some hilarious words, phrases, and sentences. Examples include ‘those who call themselves the Indian left’ (p. 40), ‘dance between conflicting postures’ (p. 45), ‘carried out by scholars like him for the purpose of uncovering the social oppression built into them’ (p. 114), ‘typical Pollock style’ (p. 120), “frozen like some ‘people of the book’ have” (p. 146), ‘human rights interventions by the Buddhists’ (p. 260), ‘picks his historical sources and plucks out juicy quotes from them’ (p. 282), ‘Bhandarkar Readers’ (p. 295),³⁸ “not some recent ‘saffron’ ideas” (p. 298), ‘flattered his English-speaking Indian audience’ (p. 328), ‘such eminent historians as Irfan Habib and Romila Thapar’ (p. 344),³⁹ ‘bombastic escape’ (p. 370), ‘discourage the Sringeri Peetham from being shanghaied by American Orientalists’ (p. 373),⁴⁰ and ‘moron smriti’ (p. 452). The counter-argument that deep social prejudice is embedded in the English language (p. 143) is another example of Malhotra turning the tables with comic effect. There is an effective mix of humour and sarcasm when Malhotra compares patronage received by grammarians from kings to grants received by Pollock from his sponsors (p. 235); and a mix of irony and subtle humour when he says that Pollock’s work is funded by a prominent capitalist Indian family which made money by selling ‘labour arbitrage’ to capitalist multinationals (p. 318).⁴¹ Some other potshots include reference to Girish Karnad as ‘Pollock’s other protégé’ (p. 325),⁴² and the headlines used in *India Abroad* coverage (‘The Pandit’ and ‘Keeper of Classical India’s Past’) as ‘monikers he (Pollock) has received’ (p. 333).⁴³ As noted earlier, in the last section⁴⁴ of the tenth chapter (pp. 351–355), Malhotra uses humour to convey the point that Pollock’s theories are not broadly applicable.

³⁸I Googled the appellation to check if this was a formal title just in case. Seems it was not, and it appears Malhotra (or Chamu Krishna Shastry?) is not very impressed with readers at BORI.

³⁹The joke, perhaps inadvertent, is difficult to miss for right-leaning Hindus who will remember the title of Arun Shourie’s work *Eminent Historians: Their Techniques, Their Line, Their Fraud* which is critical of both Irfan Habib and Romila Thapar.

⁴⁰Contrast this with ‘being Bangalored’ which refers to the scenario when jobs are outsourced from a country like the US to a country like India.

⁴¹The reference is to Infosys and the word ‘labour’ in this context will remind many readers of ‘code coolies’ working in ‘sweatshops’, since “This kind of labor is none other than a form of ‘cyber coolie’ work in ‘sites [that] are sweatshops” (quoted in Mrinalini Chakravorty, 2014, *In Stereotype: South Asia in the Global Literary Imaginary*, Columbia University Press, ISBN 9780231165969, p. 212). The tag ‘code coolies’ has long been associated with Infosys, as noted by Shishir Prasad and Mitu Jayashankar (India Tech to Rebound Bigtime, *Forbes*, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016): ‘Though TCS that Chandrasekaran heads, or Infosys that Gopalakrishnan runs today were central to the revolution in global technology even that time, all that they got for their labours was the tag “Code Coolies”.’ The entry for ‘Code-coolie’ in the Urban Dictionary ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016) shows the sense in which the tag is used: ‘An imported worker, usually from a south Asian country brought in to work on unimportant IT projects. *Raj: Srinii seems to be doing well working at that Investment bank. Ram: Nah man! He is just a code-coolie there.*’

⁴²Karnad is discussed after the late Jnanpith awardee U. R. Ananthamurthy, who famously declared in September 2013: ‘I would not want to live in a country where Modi is the Prime Minister.’ When the BJP won the Lok Sabha elections in May 2014 and some right-wing groups sent him a ticket to Karachi and urged him to keep his word, Ananthamurthy made a U-turn saying “It was too much to say because I can’t go anywhere except India.”

⁴³‘Śatāvadhānī’ Ganesh and Hari Ravikumar’s largely unfavourable review of TBFS (‘Śatāvadhānī’ Ganesh and Hari Ravikumar 2016) had a section sarcastically named ‘Pandit’ Pollock, likely impacted by Malhotra’s emphasis on the *India Abroad* headline.

⁴⁴Titled *Reversing the gaze: Interpreting Pollock using his own concepts*.

3.4 Stellar endorsements

TBFS is a book about Sanskrit written in English by an author who is not a Sanskrit scholar. For such a book, to receive endorsements from some of the finest contemporary Sanskrit scholars from India is quite an achievement, even more so when some of them co-opt the terminology of the author in their endorsements. Any Indian Sanskrit author would love to get endorsements from scholars like Dayananda Bhargava,⁴⁵ Ramesh Kumar Pandey,⁴⁶ K. S. Kannan,⁴⁷ Sampadananda Mishra,⁴⁸ K. Ramasubramanian,⁴⁹ and Kapil Kapoor.⁵⁰ Co-opting Malhotra’s terminology, Bhargava, who has been interpreting Sanskrit works for the last sixty years, writes that the book ‘promotes a debate between the “insiders” and “outsiders” of our heritage’ and states, ‘... most insiders are either blissfully unaware ... or are living in isolation’. Kannan, who translated Malhotra’s *Being Different* into Kannada as *Vibhinna*, says ‘the responsibility now lies squarely on traditional Indian scholars to take on the issues between insiders and outsiders which this book has framed’ and that Malhotra’s contribution is ‘this valuable role as the prime initiator of this dialogue’.

In addition to the above, the book also has praise from two internationally renowned scholars who are respected by both right-leaning and left-leaning academics: Arvind Sharma⁵¹ and Dilip K. Chakrabarti.⁵² While Sharma—whose useful insights and nuanced and constructive approach are noted by **McComas Taylor (2011)**—endorses the book in one line, Chakrabarti—a scholar respected by even Marxist historians⁵³—speaks some bitter truths like ‘the so-called consensus in this field was essentially a matter of agreement among Western scholars,’ the most important reason for the confrontational situation is ‘the deplorable unwillingness among Western scholars to take note of the viewpoints of an increasing number of Indian professionals’,

⁴⁵Jaipur-based Sanskrit scholar; recipient of President’s Certificate of Honour; and author of 21 books and 17 papers on a gamut of topics including *Veda*-s, *Brāhmaṇa* texts, *Sāṅkhya*, *Nyāya*, *Yoga*, *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Jain logic and Jainism, Sanskrit literature, and Indian philosophy (**Radha Vallabh Tripathi 2012**, p. 21).

⁴⁶New Delhi-based Vice-Chancellor of Lal Bahadur Shastri Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth and author of 20 books and 34 papers (*ibid.*, p. 197).

⁴⁷Bengaluru-based scholar of Sanskrit, especially Sanskrit grammar, and author or editor of 19 books, 15 book chapters, and five papers (personal website of K. S. Kannan, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016).

⁴⁸Pondicherry-based Director of Sri Aurbindo Foundation for Indian Culture, recipient of Maharshi Badarayan Vyas Samman, and author of eight books and nine papers on various topics including Sanskrit poetry and grammar (**Radha Vallabh Tripathi 2012**, p. 161).

⁴⁹Mumbai-based professor at IIT Bombay; scholar of science (Theoretical Physics) as well as Sanskrit, *Dharmaśāstra*, *Siddhānta Jyotiṣa*, and *Advaita Vedānta*; recipient of Maharshi Badarayan Vyas Samman; and author of six books (*ibid.*, p. 229).

⁵⁰Scholar of English and Sanskrit, author or editor of more than ten books and 71 papers, and editor-in-chief of the 11-volume *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* (AURO University page, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016).

⁵¹Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University; a former IAS officer in India; author of 51 books (out of which six are co-authored), 90 refereed publications, and 21 book chapters; and editor of 36 books (Arvind Sharma’s CV, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016).

⁵²Professor Emeritus, Department of Archaeology, Cambridge University; and author of at least 18 books as per Amazon India ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016).

⁵³Ritika Chopra (March 27 2015), ICHR historian Dilip K Chakrabarti raises objection on David Frawley’s invitation, *Economic Times*, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

and ‘the Western academic institutions dealing with India are full of “experts” who are basically anti-India.’

There is more praise for Malhotra’s work from several other prominent authors, professors, scientists, industrialists, and even Devamitra Swami (who serves on the Governing Body Commission of ISKCON).⁵⁴ With endorsements from as many as eighteen people including personalities influential among the target audience and eight scholars of Sanskrit and Indian studies who have authored or edited close to two hundred books put together, Malhotra has not just made TBFS too appealing to ignore for the target reader, but also answered opponents who claim that he is not notable in academia.

4 Shortcomings

4.1 Low attention to detail

Even if there was no admission by Malhotra that the book was written under ‘tight time constraints’ (p. 379) and published in a ‘very short time frame’ (p. 27), the astute reader can make out that TBFS was a project completed in a hurry. I personally know a scholar who proofread the draft of one of his books six times.⁵⁵ But Malhotra appears not to have had that luxury: attention to detail is where the book scores low. Examples of lack of attention to detail are highlighted in this subsection.⁵⁶

A generic debate with a Vedantist is called ‘a sort of mini-debate on Vedanta’ (p. 11). ‘The time of this writing’ (p. 19) is not specified anywhere; similarly the exact duration of ‘over the last seven years’ (p. 82) is not clear. The reader is advised to first read the Conclusion chapter (p. 28).⁵⁷ The terms ‘westerners’ and ‘outsiders’ are used interchangeably at some places (e.g. second paragraph on p. 42) even though Malhotra makes a distinction between the terms on pages 30 and 31. No examples are given for the many intellectual mechanisms tried and tested elsewhere (p. 53) or historians of the frontier myth (p. 64). It is not clear if ‘multiple volumes’ by Richard Slotkin (p. 65) refers to multiple books or multiple volumes of a single book. The meaning of *anāyāsena* is missing and ‘knows totality’ is redundant in the translation of *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* 3.115 (p. 107). George Cardona’s views are cited (p. 124), but an opportunity is missed to show that a Western scholar has views which Malhotra would categorize as those of an ‘insider’. Kannan’s strong rebuttal of Pollock is entirely in endnotes

⁵⁴Devamrita Swami’s page on the official site of the Governing Body Commission, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016. Getting one of the global leaders of an influential and resourceful international organization is perhaps a well-thought strategic move: one must not forget that Malhotra has been a strategic consultant in the past.

⁵⁵Vinay Kumar Awasthi of the Bhuvan Vani Trust, Lucknow.

⁵⁶Some of this would qualify as nitpicking, but I am only following the footsteps of eminent Pāṇinīya-s. Besides, the nitpicking can be useful for improving future editions of the book.

⁵⁷It might have been better to have the content of the Conclusion chapter moved forward.

61, 63, and 67 cited on pages 130–132: it might have made more impact in the main body. An example or two of the ‘large number of Indians’ who jumped into post-colonial studies (p. 136) would have been helpful, as also of ‘numerous languages banned in Europe’ (p. 143), historians who speculate that *smṛti* texts influenced laws when foreign kings were established (p. 150), ‘many prominent Muslim leaders’ whose support was enjoyed by Sanskrit (p. 166), ‘many Indian and Western scholars’ who date the *Rāmāyaṇa* to 800 BCE or earlier (p. 197), ‘influential works’ produced in Varanasi in the seventeenth century (p. 278), and many Indians ‘bringing about revivals’ in large domains (p. 293). Sūradāsa, a Brahmin by birth, is listed among those who defied hierarchical caste restrictions (p. 151). The word *antya* in *Manusmṛti* 2.238 is interpreted variously as *sūdra* or *cāṇḍāla* in Sanskrit commentaries, Malhotra mentions only *sūdra* (p. 155) while *cāṇḍāla* would have made the point even stronger. Patañjali uses the phrase *bhāṣito bhavati* to describe only one of the regional usages cited,⁵⁸ and not usages (plural) as mentioned on page 157.⁵⁹ The traditional perspective on *sūdra* mentioned on page 162 is one of the traditional perspectives. ‘Most newspapers’ (p. 166) probably means ‘most Indian English newspapers’. On page 188, Malhotra states ‘self-mortification’ is a mistranslation for Sanskrit *tapasyā* and *tyāga*: he probably has mortification (flagellation) of the flesh in mind, but ‘suppression of appetite or desire’ is indeed a meaning of ‘self-mortification’.⁶⁰ The second last paragraph on page 255 presents Pollock’s views, but does not specify this clearly. Similarly the second paragraph on page 268 probably presents the views of Satyanath but does not make it clear. The author mentions Nīlakaṇṭha’s inclusion of Vedic verses to interpret the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhāgavata* (p. 279), but to a reader it is not clear if this is in his commentary on the *Mahābhārata* or elsewhere.⁶¹ Malhotra talks of considerable evidence of Indian influence moving westward (p. 310), I expected a citation or two in an endnote. On page 369, while discussing escapism, Malhotra says that the Vedic side ‘imported many Buddhist ideas into the interpretation of the Upanishads’ and adds that some speculate that ‘certain Buddhist ideas got infused and digested into the Vedic interpretations’—these hold for only the *Advaita* sub-school of *Vedānta* and not for the Vedic side in general.⁶²

4.2 Unconfirmed, incomplete, and unconventional sources

At many places Malhotra makes factual statements⁶³ which are very pertinent to the debate, but no source is cited. Malhotra does not say where the source of three states of ‘dharma metaphysics’ in Hindu and Buddhists texts is (pp. 109–110), where Jung describes Ramana

⁵⁸The statement by Patañjali is *śavatirgatikarmā kambojeṣveva bhāṣito bhavati (Paspasāhnikā, Mahābhāṣya)*.

⁵⁹Other regional usages are described using words like *prayuñjate* and *prayogo dṛśyate*. The larger point that Malhotra makes (Patañjali referring to spoken language and not written language) is still valid though.

⁶⁰Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Eleventh Edition.

⁶¹The interpretation is in two independent works *Mantrarāmāyaṇa* and *Mantrabhāgavata*.

⁶²The assertion of crypto-Buddhism is also vehemently denied by adherents of the *Advaita Vedānta* sub-school.

⁶³Or ‘cognitive’ statements, as Arvind Sharma calls them. See [McComas Taylor \(2011, p. 160\)](#).

Maharshi as ‘pre-rational’ (p. 110), in which work Kane compares treatment of Brahmins in the *Manusmṛiti* with that of Christian clergy in the Church (p. 167), and where Bhartṛhari recognizes that Sanskrit and vernaculars are ‘felt to be related’ (p. 263). No source is cited for some noteworthy assertions put forward by Malhotra like ‘thousands of new ragas have evolved’ (p. 107), many *śūdra*-s knew Sanskrit ‘well enough to participate in social events’ (p. 277), scholars giving up use of Sanskrit for ‘daily transactions’ led to ‘an increase in rules’ (p. 294), 80% of 4.5 million surviving manuscripts dealing with Sanskrit are written in Sanskrit (p. 295), there was ‘widespread public abuse of Sanskrit-based Hindu practices’ (p. 305), the resemblance of the theme of ‘sensual women on the one hand and corrupt holy men on the other’ with the pitch by European missionaries to the Church leaders (p. 326), and *Pañcatantra* stories reaching Europe as Aesop’s Fables via Arabs (p. 371).⁶⁴ Same is the case for some notable views and assertions attributed to Pollock like the comparison of the work by Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara to Nazi texts (p. 170), the claim that ‘metrical verse form’ of *Jātaka*-s was imitated by Vālmīki (p. 179), the implication that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is purely *laukika* (p. 196), and the assertion that ‘the Hindus were too corrupt and degenerate’ (p. 282). At some places, Malhotra presents some counter-arguments as ‘tradition says’ (e.g. on pages 220–221) but does not identify the precise sources. Endnotes with cross-references to chapters or pages in the same book (TBFS) or references to other works would have helped the reader at several places.⁶⁵

Many sources cited are incomplete, and hence are not completely helpful to the academic reader. The reader is not informed where *Dharmaśāstra*-s and the *Mahābhāṣya* discuss the standard for practising *dharma* (p. 102), where Ṛgveda mentions ‘fifty-two phonemes’ (p. 108), where Kashmir Shaivism mentions four ‘levels of speech’ (p. 108), where Bhaṭṭanāyaka proposes the three-fold metaphor (p. 132), where in *Nāṭya Śāstra* one finds the account of its background (pp. 160–161), where in the Abrahamic revelation is a base for ‘divine kingship’ (p. 185), where Abhinavagupta was explicit about ‘not composing or performing in royal courts’ (p. 219), and where Nilakaṇṭha says that he ‘settled on the best reading’ of the *Mahābhārata* (p. 279). On page 187, some points in Kannan’s rejoinder are supported by citing the precise verse in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while in some only the chapter is cited (p. 187).⁶⁶ There are some very strong counterpoints Malhotra brings up like Dharampal’s conclusion based on British data that *śūdra*-s comprised the largest student body in the nineteenth century in India (p. 162) and Bilhaṇa mentioning that women spoke both Sanskrit and Prakrit fluently (p. 263), but when the reader turns to the endnotes (on pages 423 and 441, respectively), they get only the name of the book and the work, respectively, without any page or verse number. Malhotra mentions he has argued some points in a previous book (p. 124 and also p. 279), but does not tell where exactly

⁶⁴While some Aesop’s fables and *Pañcatantra* stories have similarities, Aesop appears to have pre-dated Viṣṇu Śarmā.

⁶⁵For example on pages 84–86, page 126, page 139, pages 179–182, and page 198 where Pollock’s positions are summarized.

⁶⁶A verse range could have been cited for consistency.

(chapter or page number). Similarly, the exact chapter number or name rather than ‘in a later chapter’ (p. 166, and also p. 178) would have been more helpful to the reader.

Sources cited include Wikipedia (note 21 on p. 419 and note 42 on p. 451), which is not free from edit wars (when content can change dramatically) and where even hoax articles have fooled readers for years.⁶⁷ Some blogs and blog-sites are cited: it may be fine when they are the author’s own writings (e.g. endnote 62 on page 423), but other blogs like those of Madhu Kishwar (p. 57 and endnote 6 on p. 408) could have been avoided.

To be fair to Malhotra, he says at the end of the book that TBFS is ‘not intended to be an academic book, at least not in the conventional sense’ and that he has deliberately made ‘reasonable compromises’ for ‘ease of readability by non-technical experts’ (p. 404). Unfortunately, the compromise on citations makes parts of the book difficult to be used as a source for an academic debate. The Notes and Bibliography sections (which run into fifty-eight pages already) could have been extended by another ten or fifteen pages to acknowledge the missing sources and fully specify the incomplete sources. This would not have troubled the non-technical expert as it would be a part of appendixes, and would have saved the academic experts the trouble of reading or searching works which Malhotra has himself gone through.

4.3 Uncorroborated claims

Malhotra makes several bold claims in TBFS which may come across as exaggerations to rational neutral readers, as alarmisms to sceptical readers, and even as conspiracy theories to distrusting readers. This is where the book does not make a very strong or convincing case. For readers who completely trust Malhotra,⁶⁸ evidence for such claims is not required. However, I believe the target audience of the book goes beyond such people, and Malhotra will only benefit by convincing more readers, especially the rational neutral readers. Many of these claims are around the proposed Adi Shankara chair at Columbia University. Examples include the chair being a threat to the integrity of Sringeri Peetha (p. 2), the *peetha* running the risk of losing its integrity (p. 4) and giving up control of its ‘teachings and brand name’ (p. 6), the associated professors ‘speaking to the world with the voice and authority’ of Sringeri (p. 5), the proposal being a ‘done deal’ that could not be ‘retracted or renegotiated’ by the *peetha* (p. 6), hundreds of calls being made and thousands of emails being sent to the *peetha* (pp. 9–10), the proposed chair serving ‘as a mutt (branch)’ of the *peetha* (p. 11), Pollock ‘allowing himself to be positioned as a spokesperson’ for the *peetha* (p. 17), the *peetha* administrators wanting to ‘anoint him as a sort of ambassador for their legacy’ (p. 84), and Pollock garnering support from top officials at

⁶⁷Wikipedia maintains a list of such hoaxes under an article called ‘List of hoaxes on Wikipedia’ ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016).

⁶⁸There is a significant number of such readers; there are nearly 6,400 members in an email discussion group owned by Malhotra (Info page of RajivMalhotraDiscussion restricted group, [link](#) accessed May 2 2016; link access requires Yahoo! login).

the *peetha* (p. 317). In the absence of an official statement or account from the Sringeri Peetha or SVBF USA, the reader has to give a significant benefit of doubt to Malhotra: few neutral readers may be willing to do this, especially when some people are not mentioned by name.⁶⁹

Malhotra says that there was a ‘potential security leak’ at the *peetha* and ‘official channels may have been compromised’ (p. 17). These may appear as exaggerations to rational readers: there was perhaps an open dialogue between the *peetha* administrators and Pollock without a leak or compromise.⁷⁰ There are some other uncorroborated claims like many institutions and centres of learning having been ‘infiltrated’ by ‘a new breed of Western scholars’ and their ‘Indian followers’ (p. 26, and also p. 30); Indian academics operating within ‘defined boundaries of criticism’ (p. 54); American Orientalism training ‘armies of alienated Dalits, women, Muslims, and upper-caste Hindus’ (p. 77); and Pollock having trained and inspired ‘an army of young Indian scholars, popular writers and other opinion shapers’ (p. 78).

I must confess that I am no expert on alarmism, a concept introduced into science and philosophy in the 1960s and the 1970s.⁷¹ Alarmism has been used effectively in some cases, for example in campaigns against anti-Semitism in Britain.⁷² While TBFS is certainly influential, I do not know how much of an impact such ‘alarmist’ claims have had or will have.

5 Miscellaneous aspects of TBFS

5.1 Terminology

Malhotra has coined and popularized several new terms over the past few years. In TBFS, he uses terms like ‘kshetra analysis’ (p. 10, probably derived from ‘field study’ or from the concept of *kṣetrajñā* found in the thirteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* titled *kṣetra-kṣetrajñā-vibhāga-yoga*), ‘American Orientalism’ (p. 23),⁷³ ‘Western Universalism’ (p. 31), ‘desaffronization’ of Indian culture (p. 72, the antonym of ‘saffronization’, a charge often levied by liberal writers on the governments of the NDA in India), ‘sacred philology’ (p. 105, in contrast to Pollock’s ‘political philology’), ‘rishi state of consciousness’ (p. 109, possibly inspired by Aurobindo’s ‘superrational state’), ‘U-Turn Theory’ (p. 173, Malhotra has used this term for a long time),⁷⁴ and ‘difference anxiety’ (p. 369). The terms ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ can be perceived as bold

⁶⁹Malhotra does not name either the lead donors and top leaders of SVBF in the USA (he does mention Srinivasa Yegnasubramanian, but in Acknowledgements on page 401) or the head administrator of Sringeri Peetha in India.

⁷⁰There is a photo of Pollock and Radha Vallabh Tripathi with Sringeri officials in the ‘Keeper of a classical past’ article which appeared in the June 2014 issue of *India Abroad* ([link](#) accessed April 30 2016).

⁷¹Alexander N. Chumakov, Ivan I Mazour, and William C. Gay (eds.), *Global Studies Encyclopedic Dictionary* (2014), ISBN 9789401210973, p. 14.

⁷²Sarah K. Cardaun, *Countering Contemporary Antisemitism in Britain: Government and Civil Society Responses between Universalism and Particularism*, BRILL, 2015, ISBN 9789004300897, p. 152.

⁷³The term has been used earlier though. See footnote 5 on page 1.

⁷⁴‘U-turn’ should be written with a lowercase ‘t’ as per the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Eleventh Edition).

or controversial or divisive, depending on who the reader is. Malhotra introduces these in TBFS on pages 30 and 31 where he says that the labels correspond to ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspectives, adding that they refer to the lens used and not to race or ethnicity—which is acceptable. Indeed, on page 264, he includes Hans Heinrich Hock’s views along with those of Srinivas Reddy in a section titled *The insider’s view*. There are also hints that Malhotra sees certain views of George Cardona (p. 124) and a piece of advice by Louis Renou (p. 300) as insider views and opinion, respectively. However, at some places the terms ‘westerners’ and ‘outsiders’ are used interchangeably (e.g. on p. 42). Another loaded term is ‘sepoys’, used by Malhotra to refer to alienated Hindus (p. 326) and co-opted by Devamrita Swami in the praise of the book.

5.2 Proofreading, design, and typesetting⁷⁵

Finally, some comments on finer aspects of the book which are primarily the publisher’s responsibility but with which the author should be concerned. Frequency of proofreading errors is tolerable. The sub-title of the book on the dust-jacket has three questions marks and no commas, while that on the title page has one question mark and two commas.⁷⁶ I do not know if this is intended or if it is a slip.⁷⁷ Some proofreading errors I noticed are listed in [Appendix A](#) for corrections in the next edition. Design and typesetting could have been better given that the book comes from one of the biggest publishers in the world. The board cover (case) has nothing on front and back panels, and its spine is printed in a single silver colour.⁷⁸ Chapters begin on verso (even-numbered) as well as recto (odd-numbered) pages which is inelegant. There are no table captions. A table is split on a recto page followed by a verso page (pp. 227–228) which makes it difficult to read: splitting on a spread (facing pages) is much better. The font changes midway in the book for two sentences starting with ‘He had visited’ and ending with ‘superior to Indian ones’ (pp. 17–18) where Adobe Jensen 11 pt is replaced by a different, larger font.⁷⁹ This is a schoolboy error in typesetting and puts the bibliophile off. When notes cover many pages (50 in TBFS) and begin from one in every chapter, the chapter name in the verso or recto headers of the notes appendix eases looking up a note. TBFS does not have this, which makes the life of the academic reader difficult, especially when the book is read non-sequentially.

⁷⁵Most book reviews do not include comments on design and typesetting, and most book reviewers do not know these fine aspects well enough. Contrast this with movie reviews where technical aspects like visuals and special effects are commonly commented upon. To me design and typesetting are very important in a book as they impact readability, though not as important as the content of the book.

⁷⁶So how does one cite the name of the book with its sub-title? The answer as per the Oxford style guide is: ‘Always take the title from the title page of the work being cited, not the dust jacket or the cover of a paperback edition.’ See Anne Waddingham (ed.), 2014, *New Hart’s Rules: The Oxford Style Guide*, Second Edition, ISBN 978-0-19-957002-7, p. 354.

⁷⁷Same is the case for not mentioning Maharshi Badrayan Vyas Samman after the name of K. Ramasubramanian in the praise for the book, when the President’s award for Dayananda Bhargava is mentioned.

⁷⁸All my ‘good’ hardbacks with dust jackets have the same design on the board cover and the dust jacket.

⁷⁹It seems the book was composed using WYSIWYG publishing software and the sentences were inserted at a later stage by copying and pasting from a source which used a different font. Shoddy! Any takers for \LaTeX ?

6 Release and Impact

After its publication, TBFS was released in multiple cities around the end of January and the beginning of February by some of India's most well-known personalities: Subhash Chandra (Chairman of Zee Media) in Mumbai, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (eminent spiritual leader and humanitarian) in Bengaluru, and Dr. Najma Akbarali Heptulla (Minority Affairs Minister, Government of India) in New Delhi. Prominent educational, spiritual, and social institutes in India hosted Malhotra during this period: Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi); Ramakrishna Mission and IIT Madras (Chennai); Vedic Gurukulam (Bidadi); The Art of Living Ashram and Karnataka Sanskrit University (Bangalore); and Chinmaya Mission, IIT Bombay, and TISS (Mumbai). Malhotra also participated in a panel discussion at the Jaipur Literature Festival along with Amish Tripathi (bestselling fiction writer). This kind of reception is rarely seen in India for non-fiction books.

While it may not be possible to show a causal relation, there certainly is an increased interest in Sheldon Pollock after TBFS was released. The petition requesting Murty to remove Pollock as the general editor of the Murty Classical Library of India (MCLI) came weeks after the release of TBFS and quoted from the book: 'In his recent book, "The Battle for Sanskrit", Shri Rajiv Malhotra has articulated that many of the writings of Pollock are deeply flawed and misrepresent our cultural heritage.' Activity and viewership statistics on the English Wikipedia for the article on Pollock have shot up sharply since the release of TBFS. Over nearly nine years between February 2007 (when Pollock's Wikipedia page was created) and January 27 2016, the article size expanded to a mere 7,021 bytes. In the next three months, the article size expanded to 34,323 bytes: growing at an average rate that was around 140 times the average rate over the previous nine years. Between August 2015 and January 27 2016, the average viewership of Pollock's page was 28 views per day.⁸⁰ In the next three months, this increased to 181 views per day: more than six times what it was earlier.⁸¹ After the release of TBFS, Pollock is being as frequently read on the English Wikipedia as Malhotra himself!⁸²

Has TBFS influenced Indian Sanskrit scholars? Certainly. Though not discussed much on the *Indology* mailing list, the book has generated unprecedented discussion on the *bvparishat* mailing list, and many notable scholars have come out in support of Malhotra.⁸³ Even 'Śatāvadhānī' Ganesh and Hari Ravikumar's largely unfavourable review of TBFS took note of the issues with Pollock's work, had a section sarcastically named '*Pandit' Pollock*, and admitted '... it becomes clear from Malhotra's study of Pollock that the latter's intent is far from noble.'⁸⁴ The MCLI

⁸⁰Over the same period, average viewership of Malhotra's English Wikipedia page was 130 views per day.

⁸¹Over the same period, average viewership of Malhotra's English Wikipedia page was 189 views per day.

⁸²In other words, Malhotra's book has probably made Pollock as famous as Malhotra himself. For this, I think Pollock owes Malhotra a gentle "Thank you," perhaps over another pleasant coffee meeting at Starbucks at 2929 Broadway near Columbia University, instead of the local coffee shop at Princeton where they met in 2014 (p. 13).

⁸³The most recent being Subramanyam Korada, a multifaceted scholar with eidetic memory.

⁸⁴'Śatāvadhānī' Ganesh and Hari Ravikumar (2016). The review called Malhotra's 'meticulous analysis of the

petition, influenced by TBFS, may have been an initial knee-jerk reaction to Pollock signing the solidarity statement on JNU, but what if it was only a sign of things to come? A conference series on *pūrvapakṣa* of Western Indology has been announced by K. S. Kannan,⁸⁵ the first one will focus on four aspects of Pollock's work. Western academia can perhaps afford to ignore Malhotra, but can they afford to ignore the traditional viewpoints when a critical mass of scholars like 'Śatāvadhānī' Ganesh, K. S. Kannan, Kapil Kapoor, and Vashishtha Narayan Jha start responding to Pollock and the like? An open dialogue between the two sides may help pave the way for the 'constructive approach' proposed by Sharma,⁸⁶ but in its absence, the 'confrontational situation' noted by Chakrabarti will only escalate.

Coda

In the Kurukṣetra war, Dhṛṣṭadyumna was the commander-in-general of the seven *akṣauhiṇī* Pāṇḍava army. He arranged the Pāṇḍava forces in various formations like *makaravyūha* and *krauñcāruṇavyūha*, fought with all leading enemy warriors, and even defeated Duryodhana once.⁸⁷ Dhṛṣṭadyumna's intelligence was acknowledged by his opponents too.⁸⁸ With the abundant support that TBFS has received both before and after its publication among traditional Sanskrit scholars and enthusiasts in addition to right-leaning Hindus in both the United States and India, Rajiv Malhotra has rightfully claimed the place of the intelligent commander and strategist Dhṛṣṭadyumna in the battle he is ready to fight. However, Dhṛṣṭadyumna cannot win the battle without the heroic Pāṇḍava-s: Malhotra is not a Sanskrit scholar and unless he spends many years studying Sanskrit, he will need the active support and collaboration of traditional Sanskrit scholars like 'Śatāvadhānī' Ganesh. The Pāṇḍava-s seem to be in *ajñātavāsa*, unprepared or hibernating, and they cannot win the battle either without the resourceful and astute Dhṛṣṭadyumna: traditional Sanskrit scholars need the help of Malhotra, unless they spend years doing what Malhotra has done. The war acumen of Dhṛṣṭadyumna and the heroism of Pāṇḍava-s must come together for both to succeed as a team. TBFS, the sounding of the *raṇabherī*, is Dhṛṣṭadyumna's call to the Pāṇḍava-s. Time will tell if the Pāṇḍava-s respond to this call and if Dhṛṣṭadyumna and the Pāṇḍava-s fight the battle together. I hope it happens: a book jointly authored by Malhotra and 'Śatāvadhānī' Ganesh would be a blockbuster.⁸⁹

works of Sheldon Pollock' a saving grace of the book. It listed 18 partially correct claims, untenable arguments, and instances of ignorance on account of Malhotra, as compared to 22 points in Appendix D to counter Pollock.

⁸⁵The announcement was on the *bvparishat* mailing list, [link](#) accessed May 5 2016.

⁸⁶As summarized in [McComas Taylor \(2011, p. 160\)](#).

⁸⁷Vettam Mani (1975), *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, ISBN 08426-0822-2, pp. 234–235.

⁸⁸In the third verse of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Duryodhana describes the army of the Pāṇḍava-s to Droṇa as: *vyūḍhāṃ drupadaputreṇa tava śiṣyeṇa dhīmatā*, referring to Dhṛṣṭadyumna as *dhīmat*, meaning 'intelligent' or 'wise'.

⁸⁹And if such a book is planned, I will happily typeset it in X₂L_AT_EX.

References

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- Radha Vallabh Tripathi, editor (2012). *Samṣkṛtavidvatparicāyikā: Inventory of Sanskrit Scholars*. Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, New Delhi, India. ISBN 978-93-86111-85-2. [Link](#) accessed April 30 2016.
- Rajiv Malhotra (2016). *The Battle for Sanskrit: Is Sanskrit political or sacred, oppressive or liberating, dead or alive?* HarperCollins Publishers India, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India. ISBN 978-93-5177-538-6.
- ‘Śatāvadhānī’ Ganesh and Hari Ravikumar (2016). The Bhagavad Gita before the Battle. [Link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

Appendix A

Proofreading errors

The following is a list of proofreading errors I discovered in [Rajiv Malhotra \(2016\)](#). These may be corrected in a future edition.

1. ‘Many century later’ (p. 3) should be ‘Many a century later’ or ‘Many centuries later’.
2. ‘India Today’ is mentioned in the main text (p. 7) but endnote 4 (p. 406) lists the publication as ‘India Abroad’.
3. ‘more fully awakened’ (p. 109) is an oxymoron.
4. Line 2 on page 128 does not use the definite article before Buddha, everywhere else it is ‘the Buddha’.
5. ‘500 Indian books’ should be ‘500 Indian works’ (p. 144): Indian books are not being translated, but Indian classical works are.
6. ‘paramdharma’ should be ‘paramadharma’ (p. 155).
7. ‘It is clear through his grammar that Patanjali is frequently drawing rules ...’ (p. 158): it should be Pāṇini, as it is Pāṇini drawing rules in his grammar (Patañjali is only commenting on the rules).
8. ‘almost every page’ (p. 158) should perhaps be ‘almost every *āhnika*’? *Mahābhāṣya* was not written on pages.
9. The flow of influence of Orientalism (p. 169): probably a diagram with arrows was intended, as indicated by the two ‘= = >’ signs.
10. A section is titled *Response: Critiques by European scholars* (p. 171) but critique by only one scholar is presented. Similarly the section title *Western academic critiques of Pollock* (p. 300) gives the impression of multiple critiques but only Hanneder’s critique is presented.
11. ‘*He says that the brahmin’s importance ...*’ (p. 183): should the first three words be italicized?
12. ‘only one verse’ (p. 184) should be ‘only a few verses’, as Pollock refers to a range of verses.
13. ‘Natya Shasta’ (p. 207) should be ‘Natya Shastra’.
14. Time of Rūpa Gosvāmī is mentioned as fourteenth century on page 207 and fifteenth and sixteenth centuries on page 208.
15. ‘diagram below’ (p. 215) should be ‘diagram on the next page’.
16. ‘rājya and kāvya’ (p. 218): It is unlikely the word ‘and’ is italicized in the source.

17. The name of the work *Caurapañcāśīkā* is translated as ‘The Love Thief’ (p. 219). While this is used in the title of several books, the correct translation is ‘The Thief’s Fifty [verses]’.
18. ‘sacred thoughts of the brahmins’ in place of ‘sacred thoughts of Brāhmaṇas’ (p. 260): Pollock is referring to the Vedic texts and not the community.
19. ‘Jagannath Pandit Raja’ (p. 278) should be ‘Jagannatha Panditaraja’.
20. The citation for endnote 21 on page 283 should be at the end of the sentence ‘... places like China’ and not at the end of the paragraph.
21. There is space between ‘head of Samskrita Bharati’ and the full stop following it (p. 294).
22. First comma in the sentence “In my book, *Indra’s Net*, I define ...” (p. 314) is incorrectly used as it gives the impression that the author has only one book.
23. ‘Susan Rudolph’ should be ‘Susanne Rudolph’ (p. 321).
24. ‘pointed out above’ (p. 348) should be ‘pointed out previously’ as the praise is not on the same page but on page 347.
25. ‘It says’ (endnote 3 on page 406) should perhaps be ‘The documents say’.
26. To be consistent, notes 9 and 10 on page 408 should be simply ‘Ibid’ instead of ‘Franklin 2011’.
27. Note 28 on page 411 uses the word ‘phenomenon’ for *aṣṭāvadhāna*, *śatāvadhāna*, and *sahasrāvadhāna*. It is questionable if the performance or display of an art form can be called a ‘phenomenon’. Even if one chooses to use this word, the plural ‘phenomena’ should be used to refer to the three since the conjunction used is ‘and’ and not ‘or’.
28. In note 63 on page 417, both the commas before and after ‘titled’ are incorrectly used.
29. In note 4 on page 426, ‘*nārāyaṇa tejah*’ should be written as one word (or with a hyphen) as it is a compound.
30. Note 20 on page 427 says ‘Ibid.: 22’ but the previously cited reference is ‘Pollock 1984’ for which page numbers are from 505 to 528. The page number is perhaps 522.
31. ‘Ramayaaa’ (endnote 39 on page 428) should be ‘Ramayana’.
32. Note 1 on page 440 says Pāṇini mentions the *Mahābhārata*. This is not strictly true as Pāṇini does not directly mention the *Mahābhārata*. Pāṇini does mention Vāsudeva and Arjuna, names of two characters in the *Mahābhārata*, in the rule *vāsudevārjunābhyāṃ vun* (4.3.98); and in another rule, *mahān vrīhyaparāhṇagrṣṭiṣvāsajābālabhārabhāratahailihilarauravpravṛddheṣu* (6.2.38), he gives the rule for accent when the words *mahān* and *bhārata* are compounded.

Appendix B

A critique of Pollock's claim regarding *akṣara*

In his book *The Language of Gods in the World of Men*, Pollock writes (pp. 307–308, cited in TBFS on page 250):

These few allusions could easily be multiplied to show that literacy was constitutive of vernacularization as a historical process and, what is more, that literacy often took on a cultural and conceptual importance radically at odds with Sanskrit's nostalgic valorization of orality. Something of this complex transformation is suggested by the history of the word *akṣara*, “phoneme” or “syllable,” as it migrated from Sanskrit to Kannada (in its *tadbhava*, or derived, form, *akkara*). In the Sanskrit tradition the term had long been associated with the notion that the language is both fundamentally phonocentric as well as eternal and uncreated (*autpattika*, as theorized by Mīmāṃsā), as suggested by its usual etymology: “that which does not decay” (*a-kṣara*). *Akṣara* also came to connote the Sound par excellence, the primal Sanskrit utterance *oṃ*. Thus when Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā* asserts his greatness by declaring that “Among words I am the single *akṣara*” (10.25), he is identifying himself with this irreducible and eternal core of language. By the tenth century in Karnataka, however, the term had come to predominantly signify written letters, the knowledge of writing, and literacy-based knowledge in general.

Later, after eight examples from Kannada usage, Pollock says (*ibid.*, p. 308):

This inversion of the semantic field of *akṣara* was no minor semantic anomaly; it represents a significant conceptual transvaluation emerging from within the vernacular domain.

Despite the ornate language, eloquent arguments, and numerous examples spanning over two pages, Pollock has gone wrong here. Neither is there any representation of a ‘significant conceptual transvaluation’ whatsoever, nor is there any ‘non-minor semantic anomaly’. Pollock is mistaken that the word *akṣara* acquired a new meaning in Kannada which constitutes an ‘inversion of the semantic field’. In addition to meaning ‘phoneme’ or ‘syllable’ that is pronounced, the word *akṣara* also means ‘a written letter [of an alphabet]’ in Sanskrit and connotes the knowledge of writing in several compound words. The evidence for this is found as early as in *Amarkoṣa*, which gives four words for a scribe (2.8.15):

lipikāro'kṣaracaṇo'kṣaracuñcuśca lekhake

which can be translated as ‘[The words] *lipikāra*, *akṣaracaṇa*, and *akṣaracuñcu* [are used] in [the meaning of] a *lekhaka* (a scribe).’ The derivation of both *akṣaracaṇa* and *akṣaracuñcu* is from the Pāṇinian rule *tena vittaścuñcupcaṇapau* (A 5.2.26) as *akṣarairvitta ityakṣaracaṇo’kṣaracuñcurvā*, or ‘one who is known for *akṣara*-s is an *akṣaracaṇa* or *akṣaracuñcu*.’ It is obvious that if the word *akṣara* referred to the ‘phoneme’ or ‘syllable’ in the spoken language alone, and not a written letter of the alphabet, the meaning of *akṣaracaṇa* and *akṣaracuñcu* would be an orator, and not a scribe. What’s more, while the literal meaning of both words is ‘known for letters’, the implied sense is ‘known for the ability to write letters’ (i.e. known for the knowledge of writing) so that the eventual meaning of the words is a scribe (*lekhaka*).⁹⁰ Thus, the connotation ‘knowledge of writing’ is also inherent in *akṣara* as used in the words *akṣaracaṇa* and *akṣaracuñcu*.⁹¹ In the next verse (2.8.16), the *Amakoṣa* adds:

likhitākṣaravinyāse lipirlibirubhe striyau

which can be translated as ‘Both [the] feminine [words] *lipi* and *libi* [are used] in [the meanings of] writing and arrangement of *akṣara*-s’ or ‘Both [the] feminine [words] *lipi* and *libi* [are used] in [the meaning of] written arrangement of *akṣara*-s.’⁹² The first interpretation implies that an arrangement of *akṣara*-s is called *lipi* or *libi*, which is something written. The second implies that an arrangement of *akṣara*-s can be written (*likhita*) in addition to being pronounced (*uccārita*).⁹³ Both interpretations lead to the conclusion that here too the word *akṣara* stands for ‘a written letter of the alphabet’.⁹⁴ In another verse (2.6.108), the *Amakoṣa* lists the word *aṅgulimudrā*, meaning ‘a seal-ring’, as ... *aṅguliyakamūrmikā; sākṣarāṅgulimudrā syāt* ..., which can be translated as ‘*aṅguliyaka* (a finger-ring) [is called] *ūrmikā*, and one with letters should be [called] *aṅgulimudrā*.’ Here also in the exocentric compound *sākṣarā*, the word *akṣara* stands for ‘a letter’. Out of the five compounds with the word *akṣara* in the *Amakoṣa*—*anakṣara* (1.6.20), *sākṣarā* (2.6.108), *akṣaracaṇa* (2.8.15), *akṣaracuñcu* (2.8.15), and *akṣaravinyāsa* (2.8.16)—*akṣara* means ‘a letter’ in four and ‘a syllable’ in only one (*anakṣara*). The *Śabdakalpadruma* and *Vācaspatya* list sixteen distinct compound words where the meaning of *akṣara* is ‘a letter.’⁹⁵

⁹⁰Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary explains both words as ‘clever in writing’. Strictly speaking, there is no sense of ‘cleverness’ here in the Pāṇinian derivation, which is confirmed by commentaries on the *Amakoṣa*.

⁹¹Another word for scribe is *akṣarajīvaka*, meaning ‘one who lives by [writing] letters’ (*lekhakaḥ syāllipikaraḥ kāyastho’kṣarajivakaḥ*, *Halāyudhakośa* 586). Here also the connotation of knowledge of writing is present.

⁹²This is following the two interpretations in the *Vyākhyāsudhā* commentary which reads *likhitākṣaravinyāse* as a compound and parses it as a *samāhāradvandva* as well as a *karmadhāraya*.

⁹³As in *yenocāritena sāsṅālāṅgulakakudakhuraviṣṅānām sampratyayo bhavati sa śabdaḥ* (*Paspaśāhnika* of the *Mahābhāṣya*).

⁹⁴As per the *Udghāṭana* commentary, the three words *likhitā*, *lipi*, and *libi* are used in the meaning of *akṣaravinyāsa* (arrangement of letters). The *Vyākhyāsudhā* refers to such an interpretation as *catvāryeva nāmānīti kecit*. Even as per this interpretation, *akṣara* must stand for a written letter of the alphabet.

⁹⁵The words are *akṣaracaṇa*, *akṣaracañcu*, *akṣaracuñcu*, *akṣarajanani*, *akṣarajīvaka*, *akṣarajīvika*, *akṣarajivin*, *akṣaratūlikā*, *akṣaranyāsa*, *akṣaravinyāsa*, *akṣarasamsthāna*, *akṣarāṅga*, *ghuṇākṣara*, *jitākṣara*, *sākṣara*, and *svākṣara*. In comparison, the two lexicons list eighteen distinct compound words where *akṣara* means ‘a syllable’: *akṣaracchandas*, *akṣaramukha*, *akṣarasaśas*, *adhyakṣara*, *anakṣara*, *aṣṭākṣara*, *ekākṣara*, *kadaḥṣara*, *kālākṣarika*,

If the objection is raised that mere citations from a lexicon like *Amarkoṣa* do not prove that the word *akṣara* was commonly used in the sense of a written letter in standard Sanskrit works, then the response is that the word has been used in this sense in many works. Possibly the oldest text which uses the word in this sense is the *Arthaśāstra* (third to second century BCE), which says that a scribe should be *cārvakṣara* (*Arthaśāstra*, 2.10.4). The word *cārvakṣara* is an exocentric compound parsed as *cārūnyakṣarāṇi yasya saḥ*, translated as ‘one whose [written] letters are beautiful’. In verse 18.46 of the *Raghuvamśa*,⁹⁶ Kālidāsa uses the word *nyastākṣarā* as an adjective for *lipi* (alphabet) and the word *akṣarabhūmikā* for the medium used for writing:⁹⁷

*nyastākṣarāmakṣarabhūmikāyām kārtsnyena grhṇāti lipiṃ na yāvat
sarvāṇi tāvacchrutavṛddhayogātphalānyupāyunkta sa daṇḍaniteḥ*

which can be translated as ‘no sooner he entirely comprehends (comprehended) the alphabet consisting of arranged letters on the writing-tablet than he experienced all the fruits of *daṇḍanīti* (judicature or political learning) on account of association with those advanced in learning.’ In the second act of the *Ratnāvalī*, the maid Kāñcanamāla tells Vāsavadattā:

*bhaṭṭiṇi kadābi īdisaṃ ghuṇakkharaṃ sambhabadi jebba, tā alaṃ kobena*⁹⁸

meaning ‘O mistress! Sometimes even such a serendipity as this is possible. Then, no need of anger.’ The word *ghuṇakkhara* (Sanskrit: *ghuṇākṣara*), meaning a chance occurrence in this context, literally means ‘a letter [made] by termites’.⁹⁹ The word derives from the phenomenon, observed sometimes, in which termites bore wood in such a way that the shape of the hollow resembles that of a letter.¹⁰⁰

The examples from *Arthaśāstra*, *Amarkoṣa*, *Raghuvamśa*, and *Ratnāvalī* show that the Sanskrit word *akṣara* had the literal meaning of a written letter, and as a part of some compound words connoted the knowledge of writing, many centuries¹⁰¹ before it was used in tenth-century Kannada in the sense of written letter or knowledge of writing. There was no inversion of semantic field in tenth-century Kannada; it was rather a continuity in the old semantic field. As there was no inversion to begin with, Pollock’s conclusion that that it represents a non-minor semantic anomaly or a significant conceptual transvaluation is a *khapuṣpa*, or an impossibility.

tryakṣara, *daśākṣara*, *dvādaśākṣara*, *dvādaśākṣaramantra*, *dvātriṃśadakṣarī*, *dvyakṣara*, *pañcākṣara*, *pramitākṣarā*, and *śikṣitākṣara*. Out of these, nine are formed with a number as the first word.

⁹⁶A work in Pollock’s favourite genre, *kāvya*.

⁹⁷A writing tablet or parchment, but the medium is immaterial in our context.

⁹⁸The Sanskrit *chāyā* is *bhartri kadāpīdṛśaṃ ghuṇākṣaraṃ sambhavatyeva, tadālaṃ kopena*.

⁹⁹*ghuṇaiḥ kṛtamakṣaraṃ ghuṇākṣaram*.

¹⁰⁰This word is immortalized in Sanskrit by the famed *ghuṇākṣaranyāya*. Compare the *nyāya* with the Infinite Monkey Theorem.

¹⁰¹In the case of *Arthaśāstra*, around eleven or twelve centuries.

Appendix C

Bad in law: Anatomy of a solidarity statement

A lot has been written by some liberal Western and Indian Indologists about the MCLI petition. Without mentioning their credentials or their hundreds of publications, and perhaps without even bothering to check how many of them are profiled in the *Inventory of Sanskrit Scholars*,¹⁰² Ananya Vajpeyi said of the 132 signatories that almost none of them were ‘experts of Sanskrit, other classical languages, literature, history or the humanities, or indeed scholars at all’.¹⁰³ Ignoring the fact that nearly fifty to sixty signatories were Sanskrit scholars or affiliated with Sanskrit studies, Wendy Doniger chose to mention only that many signatories were ‘scientists or doctors lacking competence to judge humanistic scholarship’.¹⁰⁴ Dominik Wujastyk, who objectively referred to the signatories as ‘so many good academics’, asserted that ‘the misrepresentation of the meaning of Pollock’s writings is so obvious that it leaves one wondering about the causes for this, and how so many good academics would be willing to lend their names to such a petition.’¹⁰⁵

I am not aware if any similar critique was made of the solidarity statement on the JNU issue which was signed by 455 academics on February 16 2016.¹⁰⁶ I will show in this appendix that the signatories, Sheldon Pollock and Wendy Doniger included, lent their names to a statement whose authors made inaccurate claims, were not well-versed at all with Indian law or the constitutional and legal aspects of the matter, and were probably influenced by similar claims made by the Indian communist parties a few days ago.

Legality of police action

At three places, the statement called the police action and detention ‘illegal’. It said:

... against the illegal ongoing police action since February 9, 2016.

¹⁰²Radha Vallabh Tripathi (2012).

¹⁰³Ananya Vajpeyi (March 2016), Why Sheldon Pollock matters, *The Hindu*, [link](#) accessed April 30, 2016.

¹⁰⁴Wendy Doniger (April 20 2016), The Repression of Religious Studies, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016 (the full article is available only to subscribers but a print from the website is available under this [link](#) accessed April 30 2016). I personally know several scientists and doctors in India who are scholars of Sanskrit and Indian languages or who have a passion for various aspects of Indian culture including literature, art, music, and philosophy (all of these come under humanities). The polyglot and polymath scholar ‘Śatāvadhāni’ Ganesh had degrees in mechanical engineering and material science; he was an accomplished scholar of Indian literature, art, and music even before he acquired degrees in Sanskrit and Kannada. Dr. Dhavalkumar Patel, MBBS and IAS, serves as the Collector of Anand; he is medical doctor by training and a scholar of Sanskrit grammar and Sanskrit computational linguistics. Another example is Dr. Shankar Rajaraman, a psychiatrist who happens to be a Sanskrit scholar and an *aṣṭāvadhāna* poet in Sanskrit and can judge a work on Indian poetics better than many qualified scholars of humanities.

¹⁰⁵Nikita Puri (March 12 2016), Murty Classical Library: Project interrupted, *Business Standard*, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

¹⁰⁶Tribune News Service (February 16 2016), ‘JNU world alumni back university students, faculty’, *The Tribune*, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

and later

... as our colleagues (students, staff, and faculty) resist the illegal detention and ...

and even further

The police action on JNU campus is illegal under the constitution of India.

Conspicuous by its absence was the reason why the authors of the statement thought the police action and detention were ‘illegal’. Without specifying which law/laws was/were violated, is it possible to say they were illegal? Did the authors call them ‘illegal’ because they somehow *felt* they were illegal, or because they knew exactly which article of the Constitution of India or which section of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) or the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) was violated by the police action and detention? If they knew, why did they not point the relevant article or section? A post on the Indology list¹⁰⁷ by one of the signatories¹⁰⁸ referred to “the ‘anti-sedition’ law of the Indian constitution” and further stated ‘a law prohibiting hate speech would be most welcome.’ The statements revealed a lack of understanding¹⁰⁹ and awareness¹¹⁰ of constitutional and legal matters in India. Most likely the authors of the statement similarly did not understand or were not aware of these matters (the relevant article in the Constitution of India and the relevant sections in the IPC and CrPC).

Article 22 of the Constitution of India (under Part III, Fundamental Rights) deals with protection against arrest and detention in certain cases. The article has seven clauses, some of which have further sub-clauses. Clauses 22(1) and 22(2) were not violated as Kanhaiya Kumar, the only person arrested in the case between February 9 and February 16 (when the statement was issued), was informed of his arrest, was not denied legal assistance, and was produced before the Metropolitan Magistrate on the same day.¹¹¹ Clause 22(3) deals with enemy alien or preventive detention, not applicable in the JNU case. Clauses 22(4) to 22(7) again deal with preventive detention, not applicable here. Therefore, the police action on JNU, including the

¹⁰⁷Available under this [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

¹⁰⁸Tyler Williams, Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago, who was signatory number 445 in the solidarity statement.

¹⁰⁹There is no anti-sedition ‘law’ in the Indian constitution. Rather, there is a ‘section’ (Section 124A) in the ‘Indian Penal Code’ (IPC) on sedition. The IPC is different from the Constitution of India. The Concurrent List (List III in the seventh schedule) in the Constitution of India specifies that the matters included in the IPC and the CrPC are part of the criminal law and criminal procedure, respectively. See *The Constitution of India (As on 9th November, 2015)*, New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice (Government of India), p. 332, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

¹¹⁰There is no law needed for prohibiting hate speech as it is already an offence under sections 153A, 153B, and 295A of the IPC.

¹¹¹The Hindu Business Line Bureau (February 12 2016), ‘Police crack down at JNU, arrest student leader for sedition’, *Hindu Business Line*, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

arrest and detention of Kanhaiya Kumar, was not illegal under article 22 of the Constitution of India.¹¹²

As per the First Schedule of the CrPC, an offence under section 124A (sedition) is cognizable and non-bailable with the maximum punishment being imprisonment for life.¹¹³ Chapter 5 of the CrPC deals with the procedure of arrest in detail over twenty sections.¹¹⁴ Arrest and detention that go against any of the clauses in these twenty sections are illegal.¹¹⁵ As per clause (b) of CrPC section 41, a warrant is not a requirement for arresting a person accused of a cognizable offence.¹¹⁶ All procedures required in the arrest of a person accused of a cognizable and non-bailable offence appear to have been followed between February 9 and February 16: a case was registered at Vasant Kunj (North) Police Station, Kumar was produced before a magistrate after arrest, and he could avail legal assistance. Kumar has been granted bail and is under trial. Even if he and other accused are acquitted, it would not make the police action and detention between February 9 and February 16 ‘illegal’. It should be noted that courts in India have the authority to declare police action and detention illegal. To the best of my information, no court has hitherto pronounced Delhi Police’s action and detention in the JNU case as illegal.

When they called the police action ‘illegal’, the authors of the solidarity statement were repeating what was said by the communist parties in India a few days ago. On February 12 2016, the day Kumar was arrested, both CPI national secretary D. Raja and the CPI(M) politburo stated that the action by Delhi Police was illegal.¹¹⁷ Were the authors of the solidarity statement influenced by these statements by Indian communist parties? Perhaps.

Scope of sedition

The solidarity statement also said:

Under Indian law sedition applies only to words and actions that directly issue a call to violence.

Here also the solidarity statement did not cite any clause in the Constitution of India, any section in the IPC or CrPC, or any court judgement. The understanding of the authors is

¹¹²The only other place where the Constitution of India deals with police action (arrest) is clause (3) of article 361 (under Part XIX, Miscellaneous) which states that no court can order arrest of the President or a Governor in office. Needless to state, this clause was also not applicable to the police action on JNU campus.

¹¹³CrPC Chapter 38: Code of Criminal Procedure 1973 page on Raman Devgan’s website, [link](#) accessed May 2 2016.

¹¹⁴CrPC Chapter 05: Code of Criminal Procedure 1973 page on Raman Devgan’s website, [link](#) accessed May 2 2016.

¹¹⁵For example, except for exceptional circumstances, the arrest of a woman is illegal after sunset and before sunrise as it would violate clause (2) of CrPC section 46 (ibid.).

¹¹⁶In case of sedition, as the punishment may be more than seven years, even a reasonable complaint or reasonable suspicion is not needed for the arrest as per clause (ba) of CrPC section 41.

¹¹⁷India being reduced to Emergency state: Left on JNUSU prez arrest (February 12, 2016), *Deccan Herald*, [link](#) accessed May 2 2016; and JNU row: Students’ Union president arrested under sedition charges (February 13, 2016), *Deccan Chronicle*, [link](#) accessed May 2 2016.

incorrect. Firstly, the section on sedition (124A) in the IPC does not restrict sedition only to words and actions that directly issue a call to violence.¹¹⁸ Probably the authors of the solidarity statement had in mind the oft-cited 1962 judgement by Supreme Court of India on sedition.¹¹⁹ But even this ruling did not say what the solidarity statement claimed.¹²⁰ So what did the authors of the solidarity statement have in mind when they made this claim about sedition under Indian law restricted only to ‘words and actions that directly issue a call to violence’?

Conclusions

Despite their credentials in Indology, the signatories were most likely non-experts when it came to Indian law and the complex constitutional and legal aspects of the JNU case. Despite this, they signed a statement which commented on these matters as an expert would have and made rather bold claims which were factually incorrect. Like Wujastyk, I wonder what made so many good academics lend their names to such a statement. Perhaps, the signatories did not carefully read and understand the statement before signing. Or perhaps they signed it in good faith, trusting the authors. The authors on their part were probably influenced by what the CPI national secretary and the CPI(M) politburo said a few days ago. Whatever be the reasons, in the absence of any evidence that the authors and signatories were experts of constitutional and legal aspects, the stark resemblance with the statements by Indian communist parties makes me reach the conclusion that the statement was not just a solidarity statement but also a political statement. And this political statement signed by Pollock, Doniger and other signatories was—as Indian courts often say in judgements—‘bad in law’.

¹¹⁸The section reads ‘Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Government established by law in India, a shall be punished with imprisonment for life, to which fine may be added, or with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine may be added, or with fine. Explanation 1.—The expression “disaffection” includes disloyalty and all feelings of enmity. Explanation 2.—Comments expressing disapprobation of the measures of the Government with a view to obtain their alteration by lawful means, without exciting or attempting to excite hatred, contempt or disaffection, do not constitute an offence under this section. Explanation 3.—Comments expressing disapprobation of the administrative or other action of the Government without exciting or attempting to excite hatred, contempt or disaffection, do not constitute an offence under this section.’ *IPC Chapter 06: Indian Penal Code 1860* page on Raman Devgan’s website, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

¹¹⁹Indian Kanoon website’s copy of *Kedar Nath Singh vs State Of Bihar*, 1962 AIR 955, 1962 SCR Supl. (2) 769, [link](#) accessed April 30 2016.

¹²⁰*Ibid.* The Supreme Court ruled that section 124A must be interpreted to be applicable to activities which involve ‘incitement to violence *or* intention/tendency to create public disorder *or* disturbance of law and order/public peace’ (emphasis mine). In the headnote, the judgement said ‘Keeping in mind the reasons for the introduction of s. 124A and the history of sedition the section must be so construed as to limit its application to acts involving intention or tendency to create disorder, or disturbance of law and order; or incitement to violence.’ At the end of the ruling, the judgement said ‘The ratio decidendi in that case, in our opinion, applied to the case in hand in so far as we propose to limit its operation only to such activities as come within the ambit of the observations of the Federal Court, that is to say, activities involving incitement to violence or intention or tendency to create public disorder or cause disturbance of public peace.’