

TFT CURRENT ISSUE | February 08-14, 2013 - Vol. XXIV, No. 52

Heritage» *By Salma Mahmud*

Salma Mahmud describes the co-curricular activities that went on in the ashrams of 6th century BC Taxila

The grammar of lions

1490 1029



The aplomb with which the great grammarian Panini met his gory death at the hands of a ferocious lion is a lesson to us all. That ancient collection of animal fables, the Panchatantra, c. 3rd century BC, mentions his death as an accepted fact. There is also a most intriguing fable expounded in The Heartbeat of the Absolute by Osho or Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh Mahesh Yogi, in the 20th century, which describes the same event.

Panini was teaching grammar to his pupils in his forest ashram in Taxila, when a roaring lion came bounding up to them. He asked his pupils to listen to the lion's roaring and try to work out its grammatical form. The lion is poised, ready to pounce, the pupils are trembling with fear, and Panini works out the grammatical form of the roar. It is said that even when the lion fell upon him he continued to explain the grammatical form of its roaring. And as the lion devoured him he expounded on the grammatical form of 'The lion kills the man.'

Panini was the founder of modern grammar

People have questioned the reason for Panini not making good his and his pupils' escape from the lion, to which The Heartbeat of the Absolute gives a firm reply. This book is a commentary on the Ishavasya Upanishad,

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which belongs to the pre-Buddhist era, and it gives an insightful perspective on the liberation of the mind from earthly pursuits through Transcendental Meditation. All things belong to God. If the Beatles could become clued in to TM, then who are we to say nay? People like Panini think that death is certain, whether it comes today or tomorrow. Such people accept death unwaveringly, because it is a certainty.

However, whether we agree or disagree, there is no gainsaying that Panini was the founder of modern grammar, and his theories still hold good today, 2,700 years after his gruesome end. (Osho didn't bother to tell us what happened to the pupils. Maybe they decided to cut and run...)

The 6th century BC was when the Buddha and Mahavira founded Buddhism and Jainism respectively

The 6th century BC was an eventful era. It was the time when Panini composed the oldest available grammar of any language (Sanskrit in this case) and when the Neo-Babylonian Empire in the Near East was overthrown by Cyrus, who founded the Persian Empire in its place. It was in this very century that Zoroaster founded Zoroastrianism. In India the Buddha and Mahavira founded Buddhism and Jainism respectively, and the occupation of the Punjab was completed by the Persian King Vistaspa, making it a part of the greater Gandharan Empire, while in faraway China Confucianism and Taoism flourished.

Panini was born in Salatura, a small town identified with the ancient and original Lahur (not to be confused with Lahore, Punjab's capital) situated on the banks of the River Indus. Alexander the Great is said to have passed through this area when he arrived in the Potohar district, and it was a part of the Hindu Shahiya kingdom of Ohind. Sir Alexander Cunningham, the founder of the Archeological Survey of India, and a renowned expert on Buddhist stupas, identified Salatura as Panini's birthplace. Scholars disagree to a certain extent as to whether to call it Salatura or Lahur, but Panini states firmly at the beginning of Ashtadhyayi that he was born in Salatura, an area that has always produced warriors of the finest order.

Alexander the Great passed through Panini's hometown when he arrived in the Potohar

He had one known sibling, Pingala, who was a brilliant mathematician and a master of prosody. Believe it or not, he was killed by a crocodile! No one can say that the two brilliant sons of Shalanka and his wife Dakshi were not disaster-prone.

Panini's Ashtadhyayi formulated 3,959 rules of Classical Sanskrit morphology, syntax and semantics, and in its 8 chapters it was the grammatical branch of the Vedanga, the auxiliary scholarly branch of Vedic religion. It is the earliest known work on descriptive linguistics, and together with the work of his immediate predecessors, stands at the beginning of the history of linguistics itself. His theory of morphological analysis was more advanced than any equivalent Western theory before the mid 20th century. His analysis of noun



Indian stamp honouring Panini



Detail of a Buddhist painting shows the life of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha



Alexander marches his army down the banks of the Indus - an early 20th century card

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Aapas ki Baat - Najam Sethi k Sath (GEO TV)

compounds still forms the basis of modern linguistic theories of compounding, which have borrowed certain key Sanskrit terms from him.



A beige sandstone statue of Pingala from 5th to 7th Century AD

Panini's work is of a brevity and completeness unmatched in any ancient grammar of any language, and is highly systematic and technical. His immensely

It is remarkable that concepts of theoretical computer science should have their origin in this Indian genius

sophisticated logical rules and techniques have been widely influential in ancient and modern linguistics. His reputation many centuries after his death can be ascertained by the fact that Hieun Tsang, the Chinese scholar-monk who visited India in the 7th century AD, mentions seeing a huge statue of Panini at his place of birth. He also writes that Panini dedicated his great work to his king, who highly appreciated it and announced a prize of one thousand gold coins to anyone who could recite the entire book. This might give an indication of the kinds of gifts that the king would have given to Panini himself. Unfortunately, Hieun Tsang did not name the king who reigned during Panini's lifetime. And today we find no takers for a fresh statue of our great ancestor being put up in his place of birth.



Surya with Pingala and Dandi at his feet

He should be thought of as the forerunner of the modern language theory used to specify computer languages. The Backus Normal Form was

The statue of Pingala shows us a man with a pen and paper in his hands, as befitted a master of prosody

discovered independently by John Backus in 1959, but Panini's notation is equivalent in its power to that of Backus and has many similar properties. It is indeed remarkable that concepts that are fundamental to today's theoretical computer science should have their origin with this Indian genius. In fact algebraic reasoning, the Indian way of representing numbers by words, and ultimately the development of modern number systems in India, are linked through the structure of language.

An equally intriguing personality was Panini's younger brother Pingala, a devotee of Surya, the god of the sun. His Chandas Shastra is a work of 8 chapters, which survives only

in fragments and is the earliest known treatise on Sanskrit prosody.

John Eskanazi, one of the world's best-known dealers in Indian and Gandharan art, exhibits in his London gallery a striking beige sandstone figure of Pingala, 43 cm high, dressed in the costume of a Sassanian dignitary. He holds a pen and paper in his hands, as befits a master of prosody. Images from Mathura depict him as one of two diminutive attendants of Surya. His appearance in the large statue shows us a man with piercing eyes and a pointed nose, and with a thoughtful expression on his face; an imposing figure indeed. There were artists who cared enough to depict him in sandstone, and so he lives on. There are even some images of Surya that show him wearing crocodile earrings...

Ashoka's Dharmarajika Stupa, built in the 3rd century BC, is now threatened by private

Pingala's treatise is at the transition between Vedic metre and the classic metre of the Sanskrit epics,

construction

Sanskrit being a language of great expressiveness and melody, and one can imagine Pingala himself composing verses in the language of which he was such an expert. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi did not care to describe Pingala's end, but his admirers might posit a believable scenario. He could perhaps be imagined as reclining on the shores of a sparkling stream near the monasteries of Taxila, humming the opening lines to a hymn in honour of Surya... 'You are without origin, middle or end. I see you with blazing fire coming forth from your mouth, burning this entire universe by your own radiance...' And then snap, the wicked jaws of a Mugger that had waddled out from the water closes upon this great master!

**Panini's Logic**

His Chandas Shastra presents the first known description of a binary numeral system, connected with the systematic enumeration of metres with fixed short and long syllables. His work anticipates the 17th century French mathematician Blaise Pascal's Triangle as well as containing the fabulous Italian Leonardo Fibonacci's "golden numbers". (Fibonacci spread the Hindu-Arabic system of numbers throughout Europe in the Middle Ages.)

To ask ourselves whether we are capable of paying homage to such greatness is perhaps futile, but at least we could refrain from supporting what is going on in Taxila these days, and perhaps speak out against it.

The future of public access to the grand Unesco-listed Dharmarajika Stupa, built by Ashoka the Great in the 3rd century BC, is threatened by private construction. It is a victim of a dispute between the Department of Archaeology and a property owner. The stupa is surrounded by military installations and army residential quarters; a private orchard nearby has been developed by a brigadier, who has constructed a wall and a gate around it, which block the only entrance to this World Heritage site. A house has already been built within the confines of the wall. Less than a month ago, the signpost directing visitors to the site was ripped out of the ground and tossed contemptuously across the road. The Department of Archaeology is considering going to court over the matter.

**The great Dharmarajika Stupa built by Ashoka, containing relics of the Buddha**

We are heirs to greatness. But we do nothing when this greatness is destroyed in the most wanton fashion.

Comments (10 comments)

Proud Hindu heritage of Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa and Punjab.

Posted: Friday, May 24, 2013 by Utsav Chakrabarti from USA

Interesting and scholarly article. Congratulations to the author and editors. Such free flow of thought would eventually help our society get out of stagnation that has set in.

Posted: Tuesday, February 12, 2013 by Ashraf from Lahore

Kudos to the author for taking up a cause of a site that reminds our brothers of a past with which they are not comfortable.

Posted: Sunday, February 10, 2013 by suresh bindhumadhav from bengaluru, india

a wikipedia reference after reading this article revealed that some sentences are a direct lift from the wiki article on panini; nevertheless kudos to the writer to take up the cause of a site that reminds present day pakistanis of a past they don't want to acknowledge.

Posted: Sunday, February 10, 2013 by suresh bindhumadhav from bengaluru, india

This is to congratulate the editors on publishing this highly informative and beautifully written piece.

We expect more of these from you. It is good to note that a section of Pakistani intelligentsia is willing to trace its past and identify with the events and persons belonging to Pre-Islamic Indian subcontinent.. The Pre-Islamic Indian history and heritage belongs as much to India as it does to Pakistan.

Posted: Saturday, February 09, 2013 by Ayush Nagpal from Noida, India

Sad such a rich heritage has been neglected. It must be preserved!! We are very thankful to writer.

Posted: Saturday, February 09, 2013 by Ashok from Gurgaon

beautiful writing by Salma Mahmud ,not only the people of Taxila every one in the subcontinent should be proud their great heritage, and pass to the next generations .well done

Posted: Friday, February 08, 2013 by A C Rao from N Y

Absolutely well researched beautiful article. Congratulations salma an Fridaytimes for publishing .

Posted: Friday, February 08, 2013 by KAMATH. from Canada

a very well researched article that I have read in recent times. The writer merits a lot of respect for this.

Posted: Friday, February 08, 2013 by navneet from Gabon

One of the best essays published at this site. Congratulations. Having studied modern Linguistics and some Sanskrit at one time long ago, I cannot concur more in your appreciation of Panini's genius. Sad to think that few Muslims in Pakistan and India have ever been aware of his existence.

Posted: Thursday, February 07, 2013 by C M Naim from Chicago



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