

किंकर्तव्यविमूढ *nonplussed, bewildered*

This fine expression — actually a Sanskrit phrase rather than a single word — is nicely translated as ‘nonplussed’, which itself derives from the Latin *non plus* ‘not more’, describing a moment when we can say *nothing more* about a puzzling situation. While not quite in the same league as such monstrous compound words as ‘Pseudopseudohypoparathyroidism’ in English, किंकर्तव्यविमूढ has an impressive ring to it. A few years ago a group of my students adopted it as their mascot, using it whenever they could; and given the many opportunities for bewilderment in the world, this meant that we heard it quite frequently.

किंकर्तव्यविमूढ comprises three Sanskrit elements:

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| किम् | <i>what?</i> etc. — equivalent to Hindi क्या (compare किंकर <i>servant</i> ; a ‘doer-of-whatever’) |
| कर्तव्य | [<i>that which</i>] <i>is to be done</i> — (also used as a Hindi noun with the sense ‘duty’) |
| विमूढ | <i>perplexed</i> — मूढ <i>puzzled</i> , with the prefix वि- (here an intensifier) |

From the internet:

एक किंकर्तव्यविमूढ प्रधानमंत्री
A nonplussed prime minister [referring to Manmohan Singh, in 2012]

विदेश मंत्री और रक्षा मंत्री इस अवसर पर सदा की भांति किंकर्तव्यविमूढ हो गए हैं
The foreign minister and the minister of defence are, as usual, bewildered on this occasion.

धरमजयगढ़ क्षेत्र में फिर हाथियों का उत्पात, तीन घरों को ढहाया, वन अमला बना रहा किंकर्तव्यविमूढ
More havoc caused by elephants in Dharamjaigarh [in Chattisgarh], three houses demolished, forest authorities continually bewildered.

It’s worth noting a close relative of किंकर्तव्यविमूढ in the word किंवदंती *tradition, legend, hearsay*. The first element is again किम् *what*; the second is the third-person plural of the verb वदति *to speak, say* (from which derives Hindi बटना *to speak; to wager*). Thus the literal meaning of the whole word is *what do they say?* or more simply *what they say* — a logical way of referring to something that is heard but not substantiated.

Another term with similar meaning is दन्तकथा, glossed by OHED as ‘a tradition; a legend; an assertion without textual support; a fiction’. This word is commonplace, but its imagery is obscure; the literal meaning seems to be ‘tooth narrative’ (?), but दन्त does not usually supply the meaning ‘oral’, which is carried by मौखिक (‘of the mouth, मुख’). When it comes to explaining the origin of दन्तकथा, therefore, I am किंकर्तव्यविमूढ.
