

## TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE INDOLOGY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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While received Indology has opened many paths for scholars studying India, it can hardly stand still in a rapidly evolving scenario. It needs to go beyond language, philosophy, ancient history etc. and, instead of considering the text-critical approach as the be-all and end-all of its quest, it urgently requires employing interdisciplinary tools. A multi-pronged approach alone will do justice to the vast data at the disposal of Indologists. Fortunately, the electronic revolution has made it much easier to collect data, edit texts with precision and prepare indexes, etc. We must recognise that it requires the tools of interpretation of classical philology, anthropology, political science, jurisprudence and sociology to make sense of seminal texts. This would often necessitate groups of scholars of different disciplines working together within a framework of frequent academic exchanges.

Indology, which was by and large the result of the engagement of the Western world with Indian civilisation, signifies the systematic study of India in all its aspects, with special reference to its textual and other traditions. It came to flourish as a dynamic academic discipline all over the world, especially in Europe and North America in the past two centuries. It is well known that India had cast a spell on different parts of the world from very ancient times onwards, but a systematic study of Indian civilisation was initiated only during the later part of the eighteenth century. It is also a known fact that the impetus for the study came from the British colonial engagement with India, chiefly to meet the administrative need to understand her socio-cultural and legal traditions. It may be due to this historical background that it has acquired some pejorative associations in post-Independence India, even though countries with absolutely no colonial relationship with India have also been actively pursuing Indian studies. Be it as it may, early colonial administrators like Warren Hastings actively encouraged Englishmen to study Sanskrit and Indian culture and played a creative role in the establishment of the Royal Asiatic Society in Bengal. Hastings was primarily interested in drawing up a code of laws for the Hindu subjects of the British East India Company and for this he found it necessary to obtain accurate knowledge of ancient Indian law books like the *Manusmṛiti* (Friedrich Wilhelm and H. G. Rawlinson 1988, p. 471). In 1785, Charles Wilkins published a translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*. In 1789, Sir William Jones published his English translation of *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. Friedrich Wilhelm and H. G. Rawlinson pinpoint the presidential address made by Sir William Jones in Calcutta to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786 as the starting point of modern Indology. In this famous speech, Jones attested the linguistic affinity of Sanskrit with European

languages (ibid., p. 476). The foundation of the science of comparative philology by Franz Bopp followed. At first, scholars were mainly interested in classical Sanskrit, but later on the Vedic literature also came to be edited and published. Seminal texts, dictionaries and catalogues were published and chairs for Indology and Sanskrit were established in many European universities. Various societies specializing in Indology, like the *Société Asiatique* (1822), the *Royal Asiatic Society* (1824), the American Oriental Society in 1842 and the German Oriental Society (*Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*) in 1845 came into prominence during this period. Indology came into existence with a great flourish and made its presence felt in many countries across the world.

Even though the area of interest of Indologists could be anything related to India, the fact remains that the impetus for the development of Indology came mainly from the discovery of Sanskrit by Western scholars during this period. Arthur A Macdonell hails the discovery as an 'event of worldwide significance in the history of culture since the Renaissance' (Macdonell 1990, p. 1). The reasons are not far to seek: Sanskrit, apart from being the receptacle of great literary, religious, philosophical and technological traditions of the Indian sub-continent, represented one of the earliest specimens of Indo-European languages which could throw much light on the evolution of a language family spreading over several continents and the civilisation represented by it. This classical/philological base has been the boon and bane of Indology from its very inception. It gave the discipline a strong linguistic/textual orientation. The inputs Indologists received from the linguistic, grammatical and philosophical traditions of India have enriched world civilisation as a whole. Indo-European linguistics is one of the glorious chapters of Indological studies. The orientation of Indologists towards textual traditions has resulted in professionally prepared critical editions and sound hermeneutical exercises down the years. However, it is an open question whether this exclusive textual and linguistic preoccupation has also sometimes resulted in the retardation of the discipline, due to the lethargy of specialists in relation to the much-needed interdisciplinary approach towards Indian studies.

Coming to the contemporary scenario, it seems that things have come to a full circle now for Indology, after the initial euphoria it generated, judging by the tone and tenor of the recent writings of some well informed scholars. Of course, it is difficult to generalise concerning the nature and function of disciplines spreading across several countries. Problems and prospects of Indology vary from place to place. But most of the scholars working on aspects of Indian thought in India and abroad are convinced of the fact that traditional Indology is at a crossroads and in dire need of redefinition of its contours in order to ensure its very survival. It is a fact that due to globalisation and the consequent trimming of state funding, there has been a tendency among university administrations all over the world to review funding for studies related to areas having no immediate practical relevance and the casualties have been classical languages, history, philosophy and the human sciences and sometimes even pure sciences. Many Indological departments are facing the threat of immediate closure for want of institutional support and the dwindling number of students. Faculty positions

are being drastically reduced and ultimately phased out. According to Brockington, in European and North American Universities, there has been a general decline in the number of posts, 'arising in part from general financial stringencies and in part from the perceptions of the lack of relevance of the subject' (Milewska 2008, pp. 75–76). Ashok Aklujkar describes a familiar spectacle of predictable sequence seen in the Western world over the last two or three decades: Universities declare that the professorship in Sanskrit or classical Indology will be abolished by not filling the post of the incumbent when he or she retires, or that the administrative unit in which the professorship is located is to be discontinued/merged in a larger unit like Oriental/Asian studies. This issue is taken up by the academic fraternity, which initiates a spirited campaign to retain the post, including mass petitions and emails. Unfortunately, this type of panic reaction may meet with only limited success (Milewska 2008, pp. 171–72).

In other words, even in the case of established centres of learning which have an illustrious history, the threat of retrenchment looms large like a sword of Damocles hanging over day-to-day activities and long-term planning alike.

Speaking about the condition of Indology in India, things are not as bright as one would like to imagine them to be. No doubt, the Central and State governments of India have established a number of Sanskrit Universities in post-Independence India. But most of them are either traditional *pāṭhaśālas* or are converted forms of *pāṭhaśālas* or new ones modelled upon them, with their accent in conventional learning. But these institutional arrangements are inadequate for the preservation of pure traditional knowledge and many systems are in the process of extinction. Traditional *gurukulas* and vibrant *paramparās* of *śāstras* are vanishing. Sheldon Pollock, referring to the decline of this type of 'philological studies' in India, has maintained that it is doubtful whether coming generations in India will be able to read the texts of their own traditions. He maintains that the decline of indigenous classical scholarship in India during the post-Independence era is a cause for worry: 'Whatever the ultimate cause the collapse is so widespread that there is every reason to worry whether, in the near future, anyone will be left in India who can access the literary cultures that had represented one of its most luminous contributions to world civilization' (Pollock, 2009, pp. 931–961).

Things are worrisome also in the case of the form of Indological studies being pursued along modern lines in the university system. Many of the prestigious Departments of Sanskrit established in other Universities are facing problems threatening their very existence, due to the decline in enrolment, lack of recruitment into faculties and the dwindling of state funding. Saroja Bhate writes:

With the explosion of knowledge however, Indology is experiencing a low ebb both in the West as well as in India. Science and technology being the areas of priority in a developing nation like India, Indology and other humanities are bound to have been scaled down in the curricula on different levels. The general apathy in the mind towards Indology is mainly due to its lower job potential as well as a strong impact of westernization (Bhate, 2002, p. 7).

There is a visible decline in the number of students opting for higher studies in Sanskrit and allied disciplines in many places, though the trend is being reversed in some other

places. The real problem is the increasing void created by the retirement of great scholars of yesteryears in many prestigious centers of studies. Publications become less frequent and many Indological journals have ceased to exist or have ceased having the impact they used to have in the past due to the general decline in expertise.

One cannot fail to detect a paradigmatic shift in India in the study of classical languages like Sanskrit in the post-Independence period. Strange as it may seem, it was during the colonial period that the study of Sanskrit and classical philology was interlinked meaningfully with other disciplines like philosophy, archaeology and epigraphy. The output coming from Indian Indologists trained in 'Western' methodology could very well vie with those of their counterparts. I am speaking of a generation of great scholars like Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Siddheswar Varma, Altekar, Kane, Kosambi and Sukthankar. Unfortunately, this organic interlinking of Sanskrit with other disciplines gradually disappeared and Sanskrit was confined to a more traditional slot in the post-Independence phase of India. An unfortunate gap has been widening between Sanskrit and 'modern' disciplines like sociology, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, archaeology and programmes related to Indian languages as well as English. It can be seen that even a rudimentary knowledge of India's contribution to world civilisation, let alone a working knowledge of Sanskrit, is hard to find within the modern Indian intelligentsia and even among scholars dealing with aspects of ancient Indian culture.

The stigma attached to traditional knowledge in colonial writings like that of James Mill, and reinforced by policy makers like Macaulay, has percolated deep into the Indian psyche to such an extent that tradition is viewed with suspicion and altogether ignored or at the worst derided. On the other hand, Sanskrit scholars working in Indian Universities are deprived of the opportunity of developing their expertise in areas where modern developments could offer exciting possibilities of research – nor do many show any inclination for such enterprises. Most of them are not proficient in languages like German, French and sometimes even English, and hence are deprived of inputs from fellow scholars working in the same fields outside India. Research is retarded and turns into rehashing what has been said already. As a consequence, there is a decline of the overall impact of Indology on the contemporary intellectual atmosphere.

According to Greg Bailey, the general tendency of the governments of the developed world to reduce state funding to tertiary education can be traced to the desire of the first world cultures to redefine tertiary education 'simply as an instrument of the economy, with the tacit understanding that the economy now encompasses society, government and culture' (Milewska 2008, p. 64). The study of 'alien cultures' is expected to be productive of results that can be 'quantifiable, innovative and marketable'. Further, with the disappearance of the colonial links which fostered interest in the cultures of India and the Indianised world of South East Asia, the erstwhile colonial powers like the British, the French and the Dutch are reluctant to invest time and money for the study in these traditional cultures which is of little practical use. Naturally, the study of contemporary culture is privileged in the case of decolonised countries like India.

There is no denying the fact that the general decline of interest in Indology in the West must be seen as a part of the marginalisation of philological studies across the

globe. Exclusive philological preoccupation, even while remaining the strength of Indological studies, has also resulted in the neglect of several other strands of Indian studies. Many interesting aspects of Indian civilisation like the plastic/performance arts and popular culture were sidelined from the very beginning. Even in the case of masterpieces of Sanskrit literature, the accent has always been on the scholarly aspects of the texts, making them inaccessible for a non-specialist.

The study of the culture of India has been inexorably linked with philology, since it involved the study of the texts produced by it, written mainly in its classical languages like Sanskrit. Predictably, Indology, from its very inception, has been intensely text-oriented and 'dominated by the reproduction of texts – primarily through the establishment of critical and other kinds of editions and translations and the analysis of the language in which they are composed' (Milewska 2008, p. 48). For that matter, Edward Said, in his *Orientalism* maintains that the Western attitude to Eastern civilisations has always been 'textual', with the majority of occidental scholars forming their attitudes solely on the basis of texts and never caring to have first-hand experiences. Whatever may be the merits of this criticism and leaving aside the problem of whether there is anything outside the text, as Derridians would doubt, the fact remains that this loss of academic prestige on the part of textual/philological studies must be squarely faced by Indologists.

There should be very many reasons for the attitudinal change towards philological studies, apart from the decline of institutional support which itself is a symptom rather than a cause of the underlying malady. The several factors Pollock lists include the hypertrophy of theory over the past two decades, which has resulted in the displacement of its object of analysis, the devaluation of the strictly textual in favour of the oral and visual, growing indifference to and incapacity in languages, especially in foreign languages, and the shallow presentism of scholarship and even antipathy to the past as such. Although Edward Said wanted to return to philology at the fag end of his career, his *Orientalism* itself, despite its value and role in the critique of the colonial representation of the Orient, resulted in the almost unintended equation of philological scholarship with the perpetuation of colonised knowledge. This dissuaded a whole generation of young scholars from philological engagements.

Now, when we think about reinventing Indology as a vibrant academic discipline, the million dollar question is that of whether the programme is to be restructured after erasing its philological engagements. It is often urged that Western engagement with India should be not through ancient texts, but with contemporary living culture. Already, there has been a marked shift in accent from classical languages like Sanskrit to modern languages in many Indological departments and renowned scholars persist in their classical areas out of sheer love for the subject, sometimes against heavy odds. Further, area studies and religious studies have been suggested as possible replacements of traditional Indology. In the case of the former, the strategic importance of a fund of knowledge about the emerging powers of the modern world somehow satisfies the norms set by administrators for University funding. It may be remembered that the very emergence of Indology was due to such a political necessity. In the case of the latter, though the accent on religion may initially attract non-resident Indians,

and even private funding, the non-theological aspects of Indian civilisation, including the secular literature and arts, pure sciences, and even some aspects of philosophy will get marginalised.

The issue is indeed very complex. It is not a simple ancient/modern dichotomy. While there cannot be any denying the fact that Indology should not be exclusively confined to its earlier slot in India's classical heritage, the remedy suggested in many well-meaning quarters would be, on closer scrutiny, worse than the disease itself. If the classical past of India is totally disregarded, it will definitely result in Indian studies being deprived of some of its richest areas, areas capable of yielding great intellectual reward, and the abrupt cessation of the unfinished exploration of one of the richest civilisations of the world. Even the engagements with contemporary India, as rightly argued by specialists of Indology in many Western countries, will lack depth if deprived of insights from India's past. Another danger of 'area studies' is that it reduces the culturally valuable components of Indology to a secondary position by exclusively focusing on politically sensitive current issues. Yet another problem is related to methodology. It is difficult to comprehend literate and highly sophisticated cultures like that of India through mere fieldwork without the competence to deal with ancient and modern texts. Swami Agehananda Bharati, the American anthropologist who took an Indian name, wrote as early as in 1964:

... cultural anthropologists seem afraid of classics and of Sanskrit *a fortiori*; and yet it ought to be evident that the 'Big Tradition' in India cannot be studied except in a very supercilious way without a good philological knowledge of the language and its literature. It often seems to me – I admit this is a mean thought – that the phenomenological emphasis on anthropological fieldwork, just like the synchronic approach of much of contemporary linguistics, with its fashionable disdain of literature, of 'meaning' and semantics, and its corollaries in psychology and sociology is a cover up mechanism for the lack of sheer knowledge of the languages involved (Agehananda Bharati 1964, pp. 6–7).

It is worth remembering that a total neglect of the philological and text-critical method will be like throwing out the baby with the bath water, as Indology is sure to lose its verve in such an ill-advised attempt. Textual studies assume tremendous importance given the fact that thousands of manuscripts are lying idle all over the Indian subcontinent and very few of the texts have been critically edited and interpreted so far.

What seems to be pragmatic and sensible is to further contextualise Indological studies by enlarging the areas of investigation and further refining its methodology. It seems that the main problem to be solved is that of whether one can make Indological studies academically more attractive and challenging. It is worth investigating whether, because of the historical background of its origin, Indology has been stuck with what Amartya Sen calls the 'magisterial', 'curatorial' and 'exoticist' approaches the West has adopted to Indian civilisation. While the former, as represented by the writings in James Mill, belittled Indian intellectual tradition, the exoticists like Schlegel exclusively focused on 'the wonderful India'.

The more balanced curatorial approach, as epitomised in the works of stalwarts like Sir William Jones, however, focused more on 'what is different in India'. In the words of

Sen, 'the nature of these slanted emphases has tended to undermine an adequately pluralist understanding of Indian intellectual traditions' ('Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination' in Sen 2005, pp. 139–60). Sen's lists refers to the vast intellectual resources, unutilised or underutilised, for the understanding of India, which consist of 'literature, stretching over two and half millennia, on mathematics, logic, epistemology, astronomy, physiology, linguistics, phonetics, economics, political science, and psychology, besides heterodox doctrines and religions'. One can add ethnobotany, musicology, performance manuals, indigenous engineering, iconography, geographical literature, folklore, metallurgy, pharmacology, food technology, herbal medicine and so on to this list. The point is that engagement with this vast untapped field will definitely enrich Indology and enhance its relevance in the construction of an intellectual history of mankind, besides having immediate practical applications as in the case of Ayurveda, India's traditional medical system and Yoga which have a global impact.

Even in the case of the text-critical engagement, we can see that a pluralistic perspective, which takes into account the regional accretions, interpretations and ritualistic applications of texts would definitely pave the way for a better understanding of texts. Though Sanskrit and other classical languages and the discourses enshrined in them definitely should continue to be focal points of Indology, due to the sheer inexhaustibility and persistent value of the resources, this should be supplemented and augmented by studies related to medieval/modern languages and culture. Indology, of course, need not be confined to the exclusive study of India's past and it can well engage itself with current problems, but it is the tools developed through the analysis of classical texts in the last centuries which give a cutting edge to Indologists in seeking to comprehend the complexities of the present against the backdrop of the past.

Thus, we have to remind ourselves that Indology should not be viewed as a monolith with exclusive concern on language, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, international relations or history. It has to be pluralistic in outlook and spirit. Instead of regarding the text critical method as the be all and end all of Indology, there is an urgent necessity to update the discipline with interdisciplinary tools. A good beginning would be colloquia and collaborative research projects involving Indologists on the one hand and on the other hand linguists, anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, medical practitioners, engineers and specialists in areas like jurisprudence, political thought, literary theory, musicology and all the branches of modern learning which can have an interface with ancient Indian knowledge systems. This is necessary to perspectivise Indian tradition and project its enduring and relevant aspects to contemporary society.

Coming to the methodology for meeting the challenges of research in emerging fields, one can say that a multi-pronged approach alone will do justice to coming to terms with the vast data at the disposal of Indologists. More sophisticated tools of analysis are necessary to comprehend the multitude of texts available for the Indologists. Fortunately, the electronic revolution has made it much easier to collect data, edit texts with precision and prepare indexes and the like. Many seminal texts are available online. Indological communities have sprung up in different parts of the world engaged in meaningful exchanges of ideas. No single text of classical India will exhaust

its possibilities if approached from very narrow conventional perspectives, whether ancient Indian or Western. We have to recognise the fact that it requires the tools of interpretation of classical philology, anthropology, political science, jurisprudence and sociology to make sense of seminal texts like *Mahābhārata*, *Manusmṛiti* or *Arthaśāstra*. Textual traditions are sometimes inexorably linked with local practices and rituals, as in the case of performance manuals, *Brāhmaṇas* and *Tāntric* texts. Sometimes a team of experts cutting across several disciplines will be necessary to make sense of some texts and traditions. Written data needs to be corroborated with inputs from archaeological findings. Indology, if it wants to regain its relevance, has to come out from its shell to meet the contemporary world in a meaningful manner. It is also important to recognise that there could be different thrust areas and orientations in Indology across the globe based on historical and cultural factors and that more frequent academic exchanges and the sharing of experiences could enrich our perceptions.

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