

## REGIONAL CO-OPERATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: OVERVIEW AND APPRAISAL

DANUTA STASIK, UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND  
(INTERNATIONAL CO-ORDINATOR OF CEENIS)

In August 2006, during the closing session of the Second Central and Eastern European Indological Conference: New Perspectives on Education about India, organised by the Centre of Oriental Studies of Vilnius University, the Central and Eastern European Network of Indian Studies (CEENIS) was set up with the major aim of co-ordinating co-operation in the region. This paper discusses the activity of CEENIS to date, also trying to consider its potential and how it should be utilised in the future for the its members' sake.

As a representative, or more precisely, the international co-ordinator of the Central & Eastern European Network of Indian Studies (CEENIS; <http://www.ceenis.eu><sup>1</sup>), I shall deal with the essential questions concerning CEENIS from the point of view of its past and present as well as its future. Such a, both diachronic and synchronic, perspective seems especially vital when one – more than once – realises that even those who are in one way or another part of CEENIS fully recognise neither its goals nor the scope of its potential. These questions are raised with the aim of once again discussing this potential and appropriately utilising it in the future for the sake of all the involved parties. Maybe the CEENIS international co-ordinator should be blamed for such a state of affairs but, as the saying goes, “it takes two to tango” or, in our case, “it takes two, or more, to co-operate!”

Let me then first concentrate on the history of CEENIS.

In 2005 (15–17 September), the Department of South Asian Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies<sup>2</sup> of the University of Warsaw, in co-operation with the Embassy of India in Poland and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (New Delhi) organised the 1st Central and Eastern European Indological Conference on Regional Co-operation. That conference was an indirect result of yet another conference – the All-Poland Indological Conference that had taken place at the University of Warsaw in April 2004.<sup>3</sup> During and after that conference, an irresistible feeling was born that a similar gathering of scholars, this time not only from Poland but from the whole region, would prove an exceptional opportunity for exchanging Indological expertise and finding ways in which it could be shared in the regular academic work of Central and Eastern European academic institutions. This idea, first put forward to the then Ambassador of India to Poland,

<sup>1</sup> In November 2010, the address of the CEENIS website was changed to: <http://www.ceenis.uw.edu.pl>.

<sup>2</sup> At present – the Chair of South Asian Studies of the Faculty of Oriental Studies.

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see the conference volume: Stasik and Trynkowska 2006.

HE Mr. Anil Wadhwa, was accepted with deep understanding and with a commitment of time; it found in him both an untiring supporter and advocate. Mentioning here the name of the Ambassador of India to Poland, I am willing to stress not so much the involvement of a particular individual – that of course cannot be overestimated – but the involvement of the Government of India, in this case the Embassy of India in Poland as well as the ICCR, the main sponsor of the 1st Central and Eastern European Indological Conference on Regional Co-operation that materialised in 2005 in Warsaw.

It is worth mentioning here that somewhat earlier, before the Warsaw conference, at least two, to my knowledge, other regional conferences were organised on a similar basis, i.e. in close co-operation with India with the sponsorship of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; however, they were concerned solely with Hindi. These were: an International Hindi Conference-cum-Workshop that took place at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, Hungary, in March 2002, and the 2nd International Conference of Hindi Scholars in Central and Eastern Europe, organised in Romania in July 2004 by Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania in Miercurea Ciuc. In my opinion, the fact of these three conferences taking place in the same region, within a relatively short period of time, should not be seen as a mere coincidence but as a direct consequence of the political climate of the first years of the second millennium. In our region, these years were crucial, especially in view of the final stage of negotiations with the EU and the resulting enlargement of the European Union through accession, in 2004, of such countries as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia (and the then planned accession of Bulgaria and Romania). At the same time, unprecedented growth in the Indian economy became a fact and the whole of Europe witnessed a new climate with regard to India, growing interest in Indian culture (with its most popular expression – the phenomenon of the popularity of Bollywood film and music), in Indian languages, and as a result also in Indian studies. No wonder that this was also the time when India herself intensified the direct promotion of Indian culture and its presence in Central Europe.

During the Warsaw conference, participants were unanimous that most universities of the region and their departments of Indian studies were facing similar problems that could be solved by means of regular contacts and collaboration – the need for continuing similar meetings in order to facilitate the implementation of joint projects, exchange programmes between teachers and students, as well as standardised publications for the teaching of Indian studies – all these things were distinctly articulated. Speaking during the closing session, the Deputy Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Prof. Piotr Taracha, pointed to the immense opportunities emerging from the close co-operation of Central and Eastern European countries with India that should make funding from the EU more easily available. HE Ambassador of India, Mr. Anil Wadhwa, and Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, Mr. V. Ashok, confirmed the willingness of the Government of India to promote Indian scholarship in the region.

Soon after the conference its Report was prepared and sent to all the participants as well as to the Government of India via the Indian Embassy in Poland. As its full text

can be easily accessed both on the CEENIS website and in the conference volume<sup>4</sup>, let me here limit myself to its most vital part in this context, i.e. to the proposals put forward by the conference participants.

- 1) Regional Indological conferences with a specified theme should continue in the future and should become an integral part of future conferences on regional co-operation. Conference materials should be published in a conference volume.
- 2) Considering imminent challenges facing all universities in new EU-member countries and these countries that are about to join the EU, and in particular the shift from five-year/four-year MA courses to a BA-MA-PhD three-level structure (following the Bologna agreement). This involves working out the possibilities of preparing a common syllabus that could be taught in English (this, in turn, calls for the need to prepare appropriate textbooks and multimedia teaching materials), thus facilitating the mobility of teaching staff and students, while basic instruction, especially at lower levels, should remain in national languages of a given country.
- 3) The possibility of direct collaboration with Indian academic institutions should be investigated and encouraged.
- 4) Establishment of a network for exchange of academic lecturers between institutions of the region (both local and Indian). Visits of foreign scholars can be co-ordinated by several institutes of the region, so that more people can benefit from their expertise. The idea of regional rather than national visits should be implemented.
- 5) Organisation of regular summer workshops/training camps for teachers and students on a variety of research topics, and/or orientation programs (both in Europe and in India).
- 6) Publication of important theoretical books and collections of scientific articles – the latter preferably on an annual basis – such as, e.g., proposed by Prof. L. Theban: *Central and Eastern European Contributions to Indian Linguistics*, *Central and Eastern European Contributions to Indian Literature Studies* and *Central and Eastern European Contributions to Indian Philosophy, Religion and Art*.
- 7) Simultaneous publication of a series of translations from Indian literatures in different countries of the region (all books belonging to the series in different languages should have identical typographical characteristics so as to be easily recognised as belonging to the series). This proposal reminds us of a proposal made during the 2nd International Hindi Conference, in 2004 in Miercurea Ciuc, when a publication of a selection of Hindi short stories was suggested.
- 8) In order to promote Sanskrit studies, traditional pandits could be invited to visit several institutions in the region; such a visit should last a minimum two weeks and a maximum one semester in a university.
- 9) Setting up an Indological Internet forum for Central and Eastern Europe in order to facilitate mutual contacts and exchange of information.

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<sup>4</sup> Stasik and Trynkowska 2007.

- 10) Taking into consideration the unsatisfactory condition of many Indological libraries in the region (as far as original texts, dictionaries, and secondary sources are concerned), a long-term “Indological Libraries in C&E Europe” project should be put into operation with the help of the ICCR, Indian publishers and other institutions. The needs of the relevant libraries should first be recognised in detail, so that they do not receive irrelevant, unnecessary materials.

For the time being let me discontinue this train of thought, especially the discussion of the state of the implementation of these proposals to date (to which we will get back soon), and let me first complete the history of CEENIS.

In Warsaw, the representatives of both Sofia University and Vilnius University expressed their readiness to host the next regional conference within a year. One year after the Warsaw conference, in August 2006, the Second Central and Eastern European Indological Conference: New Perspectives on Education about India was organised by the Centre of Oriental Studies of Vilnius University, in co-operation with the Embassy of India to Lithuania and the ICCR. During the closing session of the Vilnius conference, the participants – in fact repeating the majority of the proposals put forward during the Warsaw conference – reached unanimous consent that there was an overwhelming need to establish a body responsible for their final implementation. As a result, in Vilnius in 2006, the Central & Eastern European Network of Indian Studies (CEENIS<sup>5</sup>) was set up with the author of the present words as its international co-ordinator. It is worthwhile observing here that from its inception CEENIS has been meant to function as a body of academic institutions concerned with Indian studies and research that will first of all attempt to co-ordinate co-operation in the region in close collaboration with the appropriate agencies of the Government of India.

Within a few months of the Vilnius conference, the CEENIS website was built (as a result of co-operation between the Department of South Asian Studies of the University of Warsaw and the Embassy of India to Poland) and put on the Net in order to serve as a primary source of information about the events taking place within the framework of regional co-operation, as well as an additional source of information about the CEENIS member institutions for all potential website visitors, providing them with useful links, e.g. with the addresses of these institutions’ websites or contacts with national co-ordinators.

Although during the Vilnius conference two Indological centres, i.e. Prague and Sofia, expressed their readiness to host the next regional conference, not much happened during the following three years, beside yet another Hindi conference: The Second International Hindi Conference-cum-Workshop for the Central and East European countries that was organised in October 2007 by Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest with the help of the Embassy of India in Hungary and the Ministry of External Affairs.

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<sup>5</sup> The name initially proposed was: the Central & Eastern European Network of South Asian Studies.

Three years after the Vilnius conference, in September 2009, the International Indology Conference “Tradition and Modernity in Indian Culture, Indology and Teaching about India” was organised in Bulgaria by Sofia University in co-operation with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the Indian Embassy in Sofia. During the roundtable discussion at the end of the Sofia conference, the question of an astounding attitude of CEENIS members towards their own achievements in regional co-operation to date was raised by me – instead of putting stress on continuity, in fact we have been striving to prove just the opposite, i.e. to admit discontinuity with the original aims. Please note in this context that in Sofia participants met on the occasion of **the International Indology Conference** “Tradition and Modernity in Indian Culture, Indology and Teaching about India” and also here in Prague it is the **International Conference** “Indological Studies and Research: Languages, Literatures, History and Culture – Indological Identities”. An example of Hindi conferences can also be mentioned here. After the Budapest conference of 2002, the **Second International Hindi Conference** was organised in Miercurea Ciuc in 2004 but in 2007 once again Hindi scholars from the region met at **the Second International Hindi Conference**.

The question has to be asked – why is it so? It seems to me that the most obvious answer is that we are still too preoccupied with thinking in terms of what is national, i.e. in practice meaning one institution, instead of transnational, i.e. meaning a group of institutions. And this is so even when an international event, i.e. with the prominent participation of Indian partners, but at the same time also evidently regional, is organised. Or maybe, let me be wrong, such a situation is a reflection of the unconscious/conscious fear of monopolising such activities by CEENIS. If this is the case, once again it has to be stressed that CEENIS is nothing more nor less than the universities and institutes that form it and work for the cause of Indian studies in Europe. And all those who, by any chance, forget that in today’s reality it is an asset to be a member of an academic consortium or a network, which testifies to the fact that there is a group capable of long-term co-operation and has a number of events/projects to its credit, act against their own interest.

In this context, it is useful to go back to the proposals put forward by the participants at the Warsaw conference. As it turns out, only two out of ten points (1 and 9) can be considered to have been brought into effect, albeit to some extent. This is especially obvious in the case of the first proposal – regional Indological conferences with a specified theme do continue. However, have they become an integral part of conferences on regional co-operation or, for that matter, an integral part of regional co-operation as such? I hope that this is the right time for all the involved parties to reconsider the above-raised points and to share conclusions in this regard with others before too long...

## REFERENCES

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