

**INDOLOGY – A COMPLEX BRANCH OF KNOWLEDGE****JAROSLAV VACEK, CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE**

*Axiom: Indology starts in and returns to India.*

The paper discusses the relevance of various disciplines practised within Indology in past and present, with particular reference to Indology in Prague. Its main aim is to show that the various methodological approaches are complementary. The study of India from the position of modern social sciences is very relevant in the modern globalised world, but outside India it should not miss the necessary background and solid knowledge of languages, literatures and cultural history.

As background to the development of Indology in Prague since 1850, I would like to discuss briefly the question of the relevance of various approaches to this complex branch of knowledge. It is not only (and no more) romanticism and it should in no way be practised as the proscribed 'orientalism'.<sup>1</sup>

Indology in the Czech Republic has a history of just over a hundred and sixty years on academic soil. The first Chair of Comparative Linguistics including Sanskrit was established in 1850 at the German Philosophical Faculty of Charles University in Prague. In 1882 another Chair was established at the Czech Philosophical Faculty.

The Czech revivalists had already discovered Sanskrit in the 1820s, though it had become known in Europe a few decades earlier. It turned out that Czech is very close to Sanskrit. For the revivalists this fact was an important support, because Czech had been neglected for several centuries; it had been used only for basic communication and the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of reviving its role in education, literature and culture in general. This closeness to a classical language with an ancient literary tradition and cultural prestige had a catalysing effect among the Czech intelligentsia of that time. This may have been one of the reasons for the positive reception of Indian literature and culture by Czech writers and also thinkers ever since (cf. Lesný 1933).

It follows from the historical context in which Indology started in the West – after the 'discovery' of Sanskrit as a language related to classical languages of Europe by William Jones in 1786<sup>2</sup> – that the study developed in the direction of philology, the study of language, literary texts and their interpretation.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also the contribution of M. Hříbek above in this volume dealing with the question.

<sup>2</sup> Lecture on 2 February 1786 in the Royal Asiatic Society; published in *Asiatic Researches*, I, 1788, p. 422f. Note also that in his time (early 19<sup>th</sup> cent.) Dugald Stewart considered this to be a "hoax", cf. e.g. MacDonell 1905, p. 2: "... Dugald Stewart, the philosopher, wrote an essay in which he endeavoured to prove that not only Sanskrit literature, but also the Sanskrit language, was a forgery made by crafty Brahmans on the model of Greek after Alexander's conquest." Cf. also Trautmann 2006, p. 18 (with further references).

This is of course a simplified statement, because there were also many other fields of interest which developed in a parallel way – history, archaeology, numismatics etc. But if we look at the main stream of academic Indology, it really started from the philological and linguistic analysis, which was an important stream and which developed in one direction towards Indo-European comparative studies – one culminating point being particularly the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – including A. Schleicher who started his academic career in Prague.

This is in a way understandable because European or Western Indology in general has of necessity been confined to narrower fields of learning and research, which included the various branches of language learning, linguistics, reading texts and literary interpretation, history and various aspects of Indian 'life and institutions', partly also in historical perspective. The process of learning and teaching on academic soil in the early years should be as complex and comprehensive as possible, because Europeans coming to the University practically start at primary school level and must obtain a systematic, both practical and theoretical, knowledge about the subject within a couple of years. Ideally, this then could and should become a solid background for specialised research in one (possibly two) field(s), for example it would make no sense to be a linguist without literature or history, an historian without language etc.

Accordingly, the academic tradition in Prague also concentrated on the various specific problems of linguistics and literatures, and relatively slowly extended its field of interest to history and culture, particularly religion and also ethnology. Thus the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was still rather 'classical' (e.g. A. Ludwig – Vedic studies, though he was also interested in Dravidian), but the trend started turning to culture by the turn of the century. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indology in Prague was represented by two well-known specialists. One of them was Moriz Winternitz (1863–1937) who acquired fame through his pioneering work *History of Indian Literature* (three volumes originally written in German, later translated into English), but was also interested in other aspects of Indian culture.

Vincenc Lesný (1882–1953), who wrote mainly in Czech, was in many respects a pivotal figure in Czech Indology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Filipický 1982; Vacek 1990). Besides his work in Buddhism, he was interested in modern Indian languages, particularly Bengali, Hindi and Marathi. Lesný's contemporary Otokar Pertold (1884–1965) studied Indian ethnology and religion (Jainism) and also knew a number of modern Indian languages besides Sanskrit (Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and Sinhalese).

It was particularly V. Lesný who encouraged his pupils to study modern languages. He was also active in developing cultural contacts and was a personal friend of Rabindranath Tagore. After World War II he was the first director of the Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences,<sup>3</sup> which at that time became an important centre of research in Asian and African studies in addition to traditional University studies. Due to Lesný's support, modern Indology developed very quickly in the 1950s and 1960s. Among the well-known specialists were Dušan Zbavítel (b. 1925), who followed Lesný's first steps and developed

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.orient.cas.cz](http://www.orient.cas.cz).

Bengali studies (cf. Preinhaelterová 1995), and Kamil Zvelebil (1927–2009) who founded Tamil studies in Prague (cf. Vacek 1985, 1993, 1994, 2009). The teaching of Sanskrit continued under Ivo Fišer (1929–2001) and Hindi was taught first by Vincenc Pořízka (1905–1982) and later by Odolen Smékal (1928–1998). A well-known linguist dealing with Hindi, Vladimír Miltner (1933–1997), worked at the Oriental Institute.

The two decades after the war were characterised by the development of both linguistic and literary studies. Besides that several books on Indian history and culture were published, as were a number of literary translations from Indian languages – especially from Bengali (D. Zbavitel translated three volumes of collected works of R. Tagore besides a number of smaller texts of Tagore as well as other modern Bengali authors), from Tamil (both modern and classical literature by K. Zvelebil) and from Hindi (especially modern prose by O. Smékal and D. Marková). However, this short period of boom ended with the occupation of the then Czechoslovakia by the Soviet army in 1968.

In the 1970s and 1980s Indology was practically brought to a standstill both at Charles University and at the Oriental Institute. Two of Lesný's pupils, Kamil Zvelebil and Ivo Fišer, emigrated to the West, and Dušan Zbavitel was dismissed from the Oriental Institute. At least he was allowed to publish translations and thus he devoted much of his time to translations of Sanskrit classics into Czech, which was, ironically, the only positive feature of the sad development of that period. D. Zbavitel has been very active in this respect to this day and his translations include, for example, the whole of *Kathāsaritsāgara*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Mānavadharmasāstra* and the *Arthasāstra*. As for teaching Indian languages at the University in the 1970s, in the beginning Tamil and Sanskrit were taught by Jaroslav Vacek (b. 1943) and Bengali was taught by Hana Preinhaelterová (b. 1938). But the teaching of these languages was discontinued step by step and within a few years only Hindi remained. Thus in fact there was discontinuity for almost one generation in teaching and partly also in research. This affected rather seriously the status of Indology in Prague, which we have been slowly overcoming over the last twenty years.

It is not easy to explain this development, because the official relations with India were good and the reasons for the lack of support for Indology can only be guessed. Perhaps one explanation may be that the 'materialist' Communist rulers were apprehensive of the potential influence of Indian religions, and thus the only language for whose teaching the University obtained permission from the government was Hindi. All this happened in the context of general oppression of the freedom of speech and party censorship and manipulation of the research and teaching activities in the sphere of humanities and social sciences in general. Of great importance in this respect was the Cultural Agreement with India, which facilitated joint ventures in research, e.g. the *Tamil Reader* dealing with Sangam literature (Vacek, Subramanian, 1989), and a generally supported exchange of scholars.

It was only after the 'revolutionary' changes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 that Indology could be resumed both at Charles University and at the Oriental Institute. There is great interest on the part of students and we have been teaching Bengali, Tamil and Sanskrit, besides Hindi of course, for the last eighteen years. Fortunately, the interruption was not too long and there were still teachers able to resume the work.

As for research in Indian subjects, there are several specific research topics. Indology at the Oriental Institute concentrates particularly on the subject of history and culture. One of the main recent results of this work is a comprehensive *History of India in Czech (Dějiny Indie, 2003, almost 1,200 pages)*<sup>4</sup> with contributions by Jaroslav Strnad (b. 1954), Stanislava Vavroušková (b. 1949), Jan Filipický (b. 1943) and Jaroslav Holman (b. 1957). Furthermore, the Oriental Institute carries out research in Indian religions (Hinduism and Islam) and their relevance in the social and political life of modern India (a volume on *Religion and Society in South and Southeast Asia, Tradition and Modernity*, in Czech, 2005, 355 pages). Besides that, modern Hindi literature is the subject of study by Dagmar Marková (b. 1935), Indian religion and South Indian history is studied by Jan Filipický, Tamil grammar is studied by Pavel Hons (b. 1977), and Buddhist studies are in the centre of interest of Jiří Holba (b. 1953). The sphere of activities also includes translations from both modern and classical literatures.

At Charles University (Institute of South and Central Asia, Indological Seminar)<sup>5</sup> the individual subjects are mostly concerned with languages, literatures, or culture, but we have recently been able to develop some of the new approaches of modern social sciences, while all colleagues have a solid basis in the languages and culture of India. So among our subjects are, for example, Hindi syntax and the structure of verbal phrases (Svetislav Kostić, b. 1951), questions of the Indian linguistic area and the Dravidian and Altaic linguistic comparison (J. Vacek, b. 1943), the ethnology of Bengal and Hindu rituals (Martin Hříbek, b. 1977) and the Tamil language and tribal languages and cultures of the Nilgiris (Soňa Bendíková, b. 1973). Zdeněk Štipl (b. 1976) specialises in Sanskrit literature, modern Indian History and Christianity in India, while Peter Duda (b. 1973) deals with Sanskrit literature, classical Hinduism and also information technologies, computer programming and software tools in relation to Sanskrit.

For the last ten years we have been developing the study of one specific subject at Charles University, which attracts international co-operation from all over Europe and partly also from India. It is the study of the symbolism of nature in literature, art, religion and ritual. This topic was started at a small seminar in 1998 in co-operation with colleagues from Leipzig and Milan Universities, at that time concentrating mainly on plants and flowers in classical literatures (Sanskrit and Tamil). Since then the subject has been extended to the whole of nature, both animate and inanimate, and also to modern Indian literatures. Small conferences were organised every year and recently Cracow and Warsaw Universities have become regular organisers of the seminars, besides Milan and Prague. Once in two to three years the subject of the meeting in Prague is 'nature in literature' etc. It appears that the Indian tradition is very specific in making use of the symbolism of nature in various spheres of literature and culture in general.<sup>6</sup> 'Symbolically', we have used the Latin name of the *Ketak* plant, *Pandanus*, as a designation of the

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<sup>4</sup> The work also includes a bibliography not only on Indian history, but also an updated bibliography of Czech books on India and Indian culture, and also translations from Indian languages into Czech.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://ujca.ff.cuni.cz/english/> and <http://iu.ff.cuni.cz/?page=home/>.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://iu.ff.cuni.cz/pandanus/>. For an opinion on the Pandanus project cf. <http://scholarswithoutborders.wordpress.com/2010/08/13/check-out-pandanus/>.

volumes published regularly every year since 1998. The series became an international journal of the same name as from 2007.

Now to compare the European tradition as seen from the small sample of the Czech studies (and some papers discussing other national Indologies at this conference) with studies in India, you will agree that there is much to be done in future. Without willing to appropriate for myself the right to 'judge' 'Indian Indology', I think from the western point of view 'Indian Indology' has some innate advantages. Indian teaching and also research in the various aspects of Indology can already count on matter-of-fact 'practical' experience in one or more fields (modern languages, literary tradition, culture in the broad sense etc.) and can be 'more to the point' in many respects from the very beginning. But we could perhaps also discuss the methodological question of the right proportion of individual disciplines in teaching and also in research, which will be different in India and in Europe and which may be a challenge, e.g. for the future modelling of University syllabi.<sup>7</sup>

Of course European scholars must learn from their Indian colleagues, but on the other hand, they may 'see' some facts and 'aspects' of the individual disciplines, which Indian colleagues may take for granted. And this may be an inspiration for discussion and possibly a better understanding on both sides. In fact, the Indian and European approaches are mutually complementary and can support each other, there must be a 'give and take'. This may, in many respects, produce not only new knowledge but also new and deeper understanding not only of India and its tradition, but in that context also a better understanding of our Western tradition. This can be 'added value' to be achieved in our complicated globalised world.

I could go into details and discuss the various disciplines and their position within the whole picture of Indology, but suffice to say that we should be attentive to newly arising needs, methodologies and also technical possibilities (e.g. information technologies). And most importantly, it is necessary to combine the Indological background with various social sciences, which can result in new knowledge. And this should be done with the aim of developing mutual understanding. Therein lies the future of Indology in general – making it a complex branch of knowledge.

At first sight this may look like an abstract construction, but it should not remain that and nothing more. It should be put into practice and tested through mutual co-operation between the 'various Indologies'. A discussion of scholars of various Indological specialisations coming from different local traditions may help to achieve a 'paradigm shift' in our discipline, to improve our mutual communication and enrich both our practical and theoretical knowledge. The implication is not to negate 'the old', but to move to a higher level of integration of the discipline.

Concerning the future of Indology in the Czech Republic I should conclude on an optimistic note. After the very 'special' development of the 70s and 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have almost overcome the gap of one generation, and it is to be hoped that the prospect of further development on the personal level is rather good. Besides

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. the above contribution of Anna Trynkowska.

the high level of interest on the part of students in studying the B.A. and M.A. courses, there are also talented doctoral students who concentrate on various aspects of Indian linguistics, literature and culture, and they provide great promise for the future.

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