

Beginnings of Indian Studies in Europe

by J. K. Nariman



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Editor's Note

The following originally constituted the final chapter of J. K. Nariman's [History of Sanskrit Buddhism](#), which is published elsewhere on this website. I have brought it out of that book to stand on its own, because, 1) it does not have much to do with the subject matter of the book in question, but stands more like an appendix to that work, and, 2) because of its great merit in summarising the beginnings of Sanskrit studies in Europe up to the end of the 19th century, which deserves to be better known.

I have somewhat changed the titles below to highlight the people involved in this great endeavour, and who are quite forgotten in our own day, and this work should be read in conjunction with [From the Living Fountains of Buddhism](#) which describes the earliest efforts made by Europeans in Pāli studies.

We are forever grateful to those who went before us.

Ānandajoti Bhikkhu,
December, 2016.

Cover:
Painting of Warren Hastings, by Tilly Kettle
National Portrait Gallery, London

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Early Missionaries

[141] The immense mass of Indian literary works which could scarcely be now controlled by a single scholar has been made accessible for research purposes in the course of a little more than a century.

In the 17th and still more in the 18th century individual travellers and missionaries acquired a certain knowledge of Indian languages and made themselves familiar with some one or another book pertaining to Indian literature. Their efforts, however, were sown in a fertile soil. In the year 1651 Abraham Roger, a Dutchman, who had lived as a missionary in Policat, north of Madras, reported on the Indian Brahmanic literature of India and published a few of the sayings of Bhartṛharī translated into Portuguese for him by a Brahman, a collection upon which later on Herder drew for his “Voices of Nations in Songs.” In the year 1699 the Jesuit father, Johann Ernst Hanxleden, went to India and worked there for over thirty years in the Malabar mission. He himself used Indian vernaculars and his “Grammatica” was the first Sanskrit grammar written by a European. It has never been printed but was used by Fra Polino de St. Bartholomeo. This Fra Polino, – an Austrian Carmelite, whose real name was J. Ph. Wessdin, – is undoubtedly among the most eminent evangelists who were the pioneers in the field of Indian literature. He was a missionary to the Coast of Malabar from 1776-1789 and died in Rome in 1805. He wrote two Sanskrit grammars and several learned treatises and books. His “Systema Brahmanicum” published in Rome in 1792 and his “Travels in the East Indies” displayed an extensive knowledge of India and Brahmanic literature and at the same time a deep study of Indian tongues and particularly the essentials of the Indian religion. Even his works have left few traces behind. [142]

Warren Hastings

About this time, however, the British commenced to be interested in the languages and literature of India. It was no less a personage than Warren Hastings, the real founder of British domination in India, who gave the first fruitful impetus to a study of Indian literature

which has since continued without interruption. He recognised (this the British since have never forgotten) that the British rule in India could not be consolidated unless the rulers agreed to conciliate, as far as possible, the social and religious tenets of the indigenous people. At his suggestion, therefore, it was decided in the council responsible for the Government of India that native scholars should cooperate with judicial officials to enable British judges to take cognizance of the ordinances of Indian jurisprudence in their decisions. When Warren Hastings was appointed Governor-General of Bengal and was entrusted with supreme powers relating to the entire British possessions in India he had, with the help of a number of Brahmans learned in ancient Hindu law, composed a work based on old Sanskrit sources in which under the title of “Vivādarṇavasetu,” or the “Bridge across the Ocean of Disputations,” were incorporated all the important elements of Indian law on inheritance, succession and the like. But when the work was accomplished there was found no one in a position to translate directly its Sanskrit text into English. Recourse was therefore had to the prevailing imperial tongue of the time. The Sanskrit work was first rendered into Persian and from the latter an English version was prepared by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed. This translation was published at the expense of the East India Company under the name of “A Code of Gentoo Law” in 1776 (Gentoo is the Portuguese for Hindu). A German translation of this law book appeared at Hamburg in 1778. [143]

Charles Wilkins

The first Englishman to acquire a knowledge of Sanskrit was Charles Wilkins, who was encouraged by Warren Hastings to study with Pandits at Benares, the principal seat of Indian learning. As the first fruit of his Sanskrit studies he published in 1785 an English translation of the philosophical poem of Bhagavadgīta which was thus the first Sanskrit book to be directly translated into a European language. Two years later followed a translation of the Fables of Hitopadeśa and in 1795 a translation of the Śākuntalā episode from the Mahābhārata. For his Sanskrit grammar which appeared in 1808 for the first time Sanskrit types were cast in Europe. These were cut and prepared by himself personally. This Englishman, Charles

Wilkins, was also the first who laboured on Indian inscriptions and translated some of them into English.

Williams Jones

Still more important for the development of European efforts in the vast domain of Indian literature was the activity of the celebrated Orientalist Williams Jones (1746-1794) who started for India in 1783 to take up the situation of a superior writer in Fort William. Jones had already in his younger years busied himself with Oriental poetry and rendered into English, Arabic and Persian poems. No wonder therefore that arrived in India, he turned with enthusiasm to the study of Sanskrit and Indian literature. Exactly a year after his arrival he became the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which developed an extraordinarily valuable career by the publication of periodicals and especially the printing of numerous Indian texts. In 1789 he published his English translation of the celebrated drama of Śākuntalā by Kālidāsa. This English translation was turned into German in 1791 by Foster and kindled to the highest degree the enthusiasm of celebrities like Herder [144] and Goethe. Another work of the same poet Kālidāsa, the lyric of Ṛtusamhara, was brought out in Calcutta in 1792 by Jones and this was the first Sanskrit text to be published in print. Of still greater moment was it that Jones translated into English the most celebrated law book of Manu which commands the supreme position in Indian legal literature. The translation appeared in Calcutta in 1794 and was called “Institutes of Hindu Law or the Ordinances of Manu.” A German translation of this book appeared in 1797 at Wiemar. Again, William Jones was the first to aver with certainty the genealogical connection of Sanskrit with Greek and Latin and to surmise it for the German, Celtic and Persian languages. He also called attention to the analogy between ancient Indian and the Græco-Roman mythology.

Thomas Colebrooke

While the enthusiastic Jones, owing to the spirit which he brought to bear upon the treasures of Indian literature, and bringing them to light, provided a powerful stimulant, the more sober Thomas

Colebrooke who continued the labours of Jones was the actual founder of Indian philology and antiquity. Colebrooke had entered upon an official career as a lad of sixteen in Calcutta in 1782 without troubling himself about Sanskrit and its literature for the first eleven years of his stay in India. But when Jones died in 1784 Colebrooke had already picked up Sanskrit and undertook to translate from Sanskrit into English a digest of Indian law prepared from Sanskrit text-books on inheritance and contract under the direction of Jones. This translation saw the light in 1797-98 and its exact title was “A Digest of Hindu Law of Contracts and Successions.” It covered four folio volumes. Henceforward he devoted himself with indefatigable zeal to the investigation of Indian literature and he was interested – in contrast to Jones – not so much in poetry as in the scientific works in Sanskrit. We owe him accordingly not only more works on Indian law but also pioneer dissertations on the philosophy of religion, [145] grammar, and ancient mathematics of the Hindus. It was he who in 1805 in his celebrated essays on the Vedas supplied for the first time precise and reliable information on the ancient sacred books of the Indians.

For the so-called translation of the Yajurveda which appeared under the title of Ezour Vedam, in 1778 in French, and in 1779 in German, was only a literary fabrication, a pious fraud, which originated probably with the missionary Robert de Nobilibus. The French poet Voltaire received from the hands of an official returned from Pondicherry this supposititious translation and presented it to the Royal Library of Paris. The poet considered the book to be an ancient commentary on the Vedas, which was translated into French by a venerable Brahman hundred years old and he frequently relied upon this Ezour Vedam as a source of Indian antiquity. As early, however, as 1782 Sonnerat proved the work to be spurious.

Colebrooke was also the editor of the Amarakoṣa and other Indian lexicons, the celebrated grammar of , the Fables of Hitopadeśa and the artistic poem of Kirātārjunīya. He was also the author of a Sanskrit grammar and studied and translated a number of inscriptions. Finally he had treasured an extraordinarily rich collection of Indian MSS. which is reported to have cost him £10,000 and which on his return to England he presented to the East India

Company. This valuable mass of manuscripts is amongst the most precious treasures of the India Office Library in London.

Alexander Hamilton

Among the Englishmen, who like Jones and Colebrooke, studied Sanskrit at the close of the 18th century in India was Alexander Hamilton. He returned to Europe in 1802 and travelling through France sojourned at Paris for a brief while. There an accident occurred disagreeable to himself, but unusually favourable to the cause of science. For the hostilities interrupted only for a short period by the Peace of Amiens broke out afresh between England and France and Napoleon [146] issued an order that all the British who were staying at the outbreak of the war in France should be prohibited to return to their home and detained in Paris. Alexander Hamilton was among these English detenus.

Friedrich Schlegel

Now, in 1802 the German poet Friedrich Schlegel also happened to go to Paris to stay there with a few interruptions down to the year 1807, – just the period covered by the involuntary sojourn of Hamilton. In Germany interest had already been awakened in the work of the English. A sensation was created especially by the English translation of Śākuntalā by Jones which was immediately done into German in 1791. Between 1795 and 1797 the productions of Jones were translated into German so also was Jones' "Digest of Hindu Law" in 1797. Nor were the works of Fra Polino de St. Bartholomeo unknown in Germany. It was above all the romantic school at the head of which stood the brothers Schlegel on which the literature of India exercised especial fascination. It was indeed the time when people were growing enthusiastic over foreign literatures. Herder had already with his "Voices of Nations in Songs" and his "Ideas on the History of Mankind" (1784-1791) called attention to the Orient. The Romantists threw themselves heart and soul into everything connected with foreign and distant lands and were particularly partial to India. As Fr. Schlegel said, from India was expected nothing less than a key to the hitherto obscure history of the primitive world, and the friends of poetry hoped, since the

publication of Śākuntalā for many similar charming idylls of the Asiatic soul, instinct like it, with animation and love. Small wonder therefore, that Fr. Schlegel, when he became acquainted in Paris with Alexander Hamilton, immediately seized the occasion to study Sanskrit with him. During 1803 and 1804 he had the benefit of his instruction and the further years of his stay in Paris he employed in study in the library there, which even then possessed about two hundred Indian [147] manuscripts. A catalogue of this was published by Haton in Paris in 1807 in collaboration with Langles he translated Hamilton's notes from English into French. Fr. Schlegel's great work came out in 1808, "On the language and the wisdom of the Indians; a contribution to the foundation of the knowledge of antiquity." This book was written with enthusiasm and was calculated to be an inspiration. Besides, it contained renderings of extracts from the Rāmāyana, Manus's law book, the Bhagavadgīta and episode from the Mahābhārata bearing on Śākuntalā. These were the first direct translations from Sanskrit into German. All that had appeared in Germany prior to this on Indian literature was borrowed from English publications.

August W. Schlegel

But while Friedrich Schlegel gave an impetus to Sanskrit studies it was his brother August W. Schlegel who was the first to develop extensive activity in Germany by means of the publication of the editions of texts, translations and similar philological works. He was, moreover, the first professor of Sanskrit in Germany and as such was appointed to the chair founded at the university of Bonn in 1818. Like his brother in Paris who commenced his studies in 1814, he started his investigations in Paris. His teacher was the French savant A. L. Chezy, the first French scholar who learnt and taught Sanskrit. He was also the first professor of Sanskrit at the College de France and had rendered service to Oriental literature as an editor and translator of Indian books. In the year 1823 appeared the first volume of the periodical "The Indian Library" founded and mostly written by August Schlegel. It contains numerous essays on Indian philology. In the same year he published also a good edition of the Bhagavadgīta with a Latin translation, while in the year 1829 came out the first [148] part of the most important work of Schlegel, his

edition of the Rāmāyana which has remained incomplete.

Franz Bopp

A contemporary of August Schlegel was Franz Bopp. Born in 1791, he proceeded to Paris in 1812 to occupy himself with Oriental languages and there sat along with Schlegel at the feet of the French scholar Chézy and acquired Sanskrit. But while the brothers Schlegel enthused over India as romantic poets and regarded the study of Indian literature as a kind of “adventure,” Bopp entered upon the subject throughout as a prosaic investigator and it was he who by means of his essays on the “Conjugation system of the Sanskrit language in comparison with that of Greek, Latin, Persian and German languages,” which appeared in 1816, became the founder of a new science, the science of comparative philology which had such a great future before it. But even in researches in Indian literature Bopp made unusual contributions. In his “Conjugation system” he gave as an appendix several episodes from the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata in metrical rendering from the original text and a few extracts from the Veda taken over from the English translation of Colebrooke. With rare fortune he seized upon the marvellous history of king Nala and his faithful consort Damayantī out of the colossal epic of the Mahābhārata and made it generally accessible by means of a critical edition accompanied by a Latin translation. It was just the one out of the numerous episodes in the Mahābhārata which approaches nearest to a complete whole and does not merely belong to the finest pieces in the great epic, but as one of the most fascinating efforts of Indian poetic genius is especially calculated to arouse vivid interest for Indian letters and a fondness for Sanskrit study. It has since then grown into quite a tradition at all the universities where Sanskrit is taught to select the Nala episode as the first reading text-book for the students, for whom it is [149] eminently suitable owing to its simplicity of style. Bopp for the first time edited and translated into German quite a series of legends from the Mahābhārata. His Sanskrit grammars which saw light of day in 1837, 1832, 1834 and his “glossarium Sanscritum” have powerfully advanced the study of Sanskrit on the continent.

W. Humboldt

It was a piece of good fortune for the young science and for the study of Sanskrit which long thereafter was connected with it, that the gifted, many-sided and influential W. Humboldt became enamoured of it. He started to learn Sanskrit in 1821, since, as he wrote in a letter to August Schlegel, he had seen “that without sound grounding in the study of Sanskrit not the least progress could be made either in the knowledge of languages nor in that class of history which is connected with it.” When Schlegel in the year 1828 indulged in a retrospect of his Indian studies, he gave prominence as a special piece of luck for the new science, to the fact that it had found in Humboldt a warm friend and patron. Schlegel’s edition of the Bhagavadgīta had called Humboldt’s attention to this theosophical poem. He dedicated to him some treatises and wrote about it at the time, 1827, to Gentz, “it is the most profound and loftiest yet seen by the world.” And when later on in 1828 he sent to his friend his study on the Bhagavadgīta which had meanwhile been criticised by Hegel, he declared that the greater the apathy betrayed in Hegel’s judgment, the greater was the value he attached to the philosophical poem of India. “When I read the Indian poem,” he wrote, “for the first time and ever since then my sentiment was one of perpetual gratitude for my luck, which had kept me still alive to be able to be acquainted with this book.”

Friedrich Rückert

Another great name in German literature connected with India was, to the good fortune of our science, a poet [150] inspired with the romance of India. This was Friedrich Rückert, the incomparable master of the art of translation. It was he who made some of the choicest portions of Indian epical and lyrical treasures the common property of the German people.

Up to 1839 it was almost exclusively the so-called classical Sanskrit literature which attracted the attention of the European scholar. The drama of Śākuntalā, the philosophical poem of Bhagavadgīta, the law book of Manu, maxims by Bhartṛhari, the fables of Hitopadeśa, and stray passages from the great epics; this was nearly the sum total of the principal works with which scholars were occupied and which

was regarded as the stock-in-trade of Indian literature. The great and all-important region of the Indian literature, that of the Vedas, was next to unknown, and people were not yet aware of the existence of the entire great Buddhist literature.

Dara Shukoh's Persian Upaniṣad

The little that up to 1830 was known of the Vedas was confined to the miserable and inaccurate data furnished by the early writers on India. Colebrooke gave the first reliable information in the essays we noticed above on the Vedas in 1805. It took several years before a German translation of the English rendering was prepared in 1847. Comparatively the most that people became acquainted with, was in the province of the Upaniṣads, the philosophical treatises belonging to the Vedas. These Upaniṣads were translated from their original Sanskrit into Persian early in the seventh century by the ill-starred brother of Aurangzeb, Prince Mohammed Dara Shukoh, the son of the great Moghul Shah Jehan. From the Persian it was rendered into Latin under the title of Upnékhat in the beginning of the nineteenth century by the French scholar [151] Anquetil Duperron the founder of the revival of Parsi learning in India.

Imperfect and strewn with errors as the latter was, it was important for the history of science in that the German philosopher Schelling, and more particularly Schopenhauer, were inspired by Indian philosophy on its basis. It was not the Upaniṣads which we understand and elucidate today with all the material and our exact knowledge of the philosophical system of India at our disposal but the Upnékhat, the altogether faulty rendering of Anquetil Duperron which Schopenhauer declare to be “the issue of supreme human wisdom.”

Ram Mohan Roy

And about the same time when in Germany Schopenhauer was delving into the Upaniṣads of the Indians for his own philosophical speculations, there was living in India one of the sanest and noblest of men ever produced by this country, Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of Brahma Samaj a new sect which sought to amalgamate the best in

the religions of Europe with the faith of the Hindus. This Indian construed the same Upaniṣads so as to read in them purest belief in God and endeavoured to instruct his people that the idolatry of modern Indian religions was to be rejected, but that in its stead Indians need not necessarily adopt Christianity, but that in their own holy writ, in the ancient Vedas, if they could only understand the latter, was to be found a pure doctrine of monotheism. With a view to proclaim this new tenet which was, however, contained in the old scriptures and propagate it by means of the sect which he had founded, the sect of Brahma Samaj or the Church of God, and at the same time in order to prove to the Christian theologians, and missionaries whom he highly esteemed, that the finest of what they believed in was already embodied in the Upaniṣads, in the years 1816 to 1819 he rendered into English a large number of Upaniṣads and issued editions of a few of them in the original texts. [152]

Eugène Burnouf

But the real philological investigation of the Vedas commenced only in 1838 after the appearance of the edition in Calcutta of the first of section of the R̥gveda by Friedrich Rosen who was prevented from the completion of his task by premature death. And it was above all the great Frenchman of learning, Eugène Burnouf, who at the commencement of the forties was professor at the Collège de France, who gathered round him a circle of pupils, the future eminent Vedic scholars. Burnouf laid the foundation of Vedic studies in Europe.

The same Eugène Burnouf, who rocked the cradle of the Vedic studies, laid the foundation stone of Pāli research and investigation of Buddhist literature with his “Essai sur le Pāli,” published in collaboration with Chr. Lassen in 1826 and his “Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien,” still a mine of information, in 1844. The Parsis too owe the savant [153] pioneer labour in Avesta exegesis. He was the teacher of K. R. Cama, the father of Parsi antiquarian studies.

Rudolph Roth

One of his pupils was Rudolph Roth who, with his Essay on the

literature and history of the Vedas in 1846 inaugurated the study of the Vedas in Germany. Roth himself and a number of his disciples devoted themselves in the following years and decades with passionate zeal to the exploration of the diverse ramifications of the most ancient literature of India.

F. Max Müller

F. Max Müller was the most celebrated pupil of Burnouf familiar to us. He was initiated into the study of the Vedas by the French master at the same time with Roth. Urged by Burnouf, Max Müller conceived the plan of editing the hymns of the Ṛgveda with the voluminous commentary of Sāyaṇa. This edition, which is indispensable for any further research, appeared in 1849-1847. A second and an enlarged edition appeared in 1890-1892. But before this was completed, Thomas Aufrecht, with his handy print of the complete texts of the hymns of the Ṛgveda rendered signal service to this branch of Indian research.

With the invasion of the immense province of Vedic literature and with the introduction into the writings of the Buddhists the gospel of infancy of Indian philology came to its termination. It has grown into a great science, the devotees of which increase from year to year. One after another saw the light of day of critical editions of the most important texts and the learned of all the countries vied with each other, in their attempts at interpreting them. The achievements of the last sixty years in the province of Indian literature have been described in detail in several special chapters. Here we have only to survey the principal landmarks along the path of Indology, and the most important events in its history.

Christian Lassen

Before all mention has to be made of a pupil of Aug. Schlegel, Christian Lassen, who in his broad-based German “Indian Antiquary,” which began to appear in 1843 and comprised four thick volumes, the last appearing in 1862, strove to encompass the entire knowledge of his day about ancient India. That this work has now become antiquated is no reproach to the author but only a brilliant

testimony to the immense progress which our science has made in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Otto Böhtlingk and Rudolph Roth

Perhaps the greatest impetus to this advancement and probably a capital event in the history of Sanskrit research was the appearance of the Sanskrit lexicon by Otto Böhtlingk and Rudolph Roth. It was published by the Academy of Sciences of St. Petersburg. The first part came out in 1852 and in 1875 the entire work in seven folio volumes was given to the world. [154]

A. Weber

And in the same year 1852 in which the great St. Petersburg dictionary started to appear, A. Weber made the first attempt to write a complete history of Indian literature. The second edition of the work appeared in 1876. It does not merely represent a landmark in the history of Indology but to this day, despite its shortcomings in style, which renders the book indigestible to the layman, it remains the most reliable and the most complete handbook of Indian literature possessed by us.

Catalogues of Mss.

If, however, we desire to have an idea of the almost amazing progress which research in Indian literature has made in the comparatively brief period of its existence, we should read the essay of Aug. Schlegel, written in 1819, "on the present condition of Indian philology" in which little more than a hundred Sanskrit works are enumerated as known to the world in editions or translations. Let us then cast a glance at the "Literature of the Sanskrit Language," published in 1839 at St. Petersburg by Friedrich Adelung, in which not less than three hundred and fifty diverse Sanskrit works are registered. Next let us compare with the latter Weber's "History of Indian Literature" which in 1852 discussed and appraised well nigh five hundred books of Indian Sanskrit. Furthermore, let us examine the "Catalogus Catalogorum," brought out in parts in 1891, 1896, and 1903 by Theodor Aufrecht, which contains an alphabetical list of all

the Sanskrit books and others based on the examination of all the existing catalogues of manuscripts. This is truly a monumental work. Aufrecht laboured for forty years over it. He studied the catalogues of Sanskrit manuscripts in all the great libraries of India and Europe. And the number of the Sanskrit manuscripts noticed in this catalogue amounts to several thousands. Yet this catalogue [155] includes neither the immense Buddhist literature nor the literary productions embodied in Indian languages other than Sanskrit. Research into Buddhist literature has powerfully advanced since the great English scholar T. W. Rhys David established in 1882 the Pāli Text Society. A. Weber again, with his great treatise on the sacred scriptures of the Jains in 1883 and 1885, annexed to science the new branch of texts which is not lower in antiquity to the writings of the Buddhists.

Encyclopaedia of Sanskrit knowledge

Such is the enormous mass that has gradually accumulated of Indian literature that nowadays it is hardly possible for a single scholar to control the whole province. It is now some years since it was found necessary to publish in a comprehensive work a general survey of all that has been achieved in the individual branches of Indology. The plan of the work which began to appear since 1897 under the title of “Grundriss” of Indo-Arian philology and antiquity, was devised by George Bühler, the most eminent Sanskrit scholar of the last decades. Thirty scholars from Germany, England, Holland, America and, last but not least, India have set to work in co-operation under Bühler, and since his death under Kielhorn, to prepare the individual volumes of this work. The appearance of this Grundriss is at once the latest and the most delightful event in the development of the history of Indology. When we survey the knowledge on ancient India and its literature brought together herein a series which is not yet completed, we can only compare it with what Lassen, only a few decades ago, was in a position to give in his great work on Indian Antiquity and regard with justifiable pride the progress which the science has made in a relatively brief period.