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“Indian Renaissance and Globalization of Sanskrit: European Indologists, 17th-20th Centuries”

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1. Introduction

Much before the well-known Orientalists of the late 19th century were some European scholars who came to India, studied Indian languages especially religious texts in Sanskrit, attempted to understand Hindu religion and culture, and exposed India’s rich religious and cultural heritage¹ through translations of the classical religious and other texts into European languages. One of the by-products of this East-West interaction was exposing India’s heritage by globalizing India, especially Sanskrit, to a wider world. Their works in Sanskrit and bi-lingual creations enhanced study of philology and ushered in the Indian Renaissance.

This paper focuses on: 1) understanding Indian Renaissance as a product of East-West interaction, 2) contribution of Western scholars specially Jesuits, in globalizing India’s Sanskrit heritage.

2. Indian Renaissance

While we accredit a renaissance to the modern era movement in India during the British period, we see both similarities and dissimilarities with the European Renaissance. Similarities are mainly in the cultural, literary and religious fields, such as re-discovering the classical texts, modernization of languages, creative writing in vernaculars, building a consciousness of the spirit of India. The movement of Renaissance also included an introspection of social evils which resulted in several social reform movements like the Reformation and Enlightenment in Europe. Dissimilarities were in the emergence of reactionary movements, constructing of a national identity based on Hindu religious identity and so on.

What is called renaissance or new birth in India was nothing other than the awakening of the mind, soul or psyche of the nation after a long or short span of sleep; it was the galvanising into creative activity of the dormant life-force of the national spirit. Raja Ram Mohun Roy is generally acclaimed as the prophet of the Indian renaissance or Indian awakening or Indian nationalism.ⁱⁱ How far was British rule or contact with the West or missionaries responsible? The impact of the West could at best be the occasion for the birth of the national awakening, but definitely not the very cause. On the contrary, the spirit of India was in the awakening of the minds of a number of eminent persons to raise India from its deep slumber and recovering its spiritual heritage, although in some form or other the impact of the West cannot be ignored to this effect.

Perhaps it could be said that a combination of factors which were concomitant to this East-West contact was responsible for the revival of that Indian spirit. Thanks to these scholars the East-West interaction gave birth to greater understanding and appreciation of India's Sanskrit tradition and replaced the earlier perspective and depiction of India as a dormant, superstitious, spirit-filled, archaic society.ⁱⁱⁱ Translations of Sanskrit texts into English created sensation in the Indian mind and made English-educated people to realize the greatness and depth of Indian culture and civilization. The names of some of the great Western indologists and orientalist to be particularly mentioned here are Sir William Jones, Sir Charles Wilkins, Colebrooke, Wilson, Muir, Monier Williams, Max Mueller, James Fergusson, Dr. Buffler, Dr. Fleet and Havel. Valentine Stache-Rosen's biographical compilation of the German Indologists lists 127 names.^{iv}

3. Jesuit Scholarship in Sanskrit

Though textbooks of philology would refer to the 'discovery' of Sanskrit by the West thanks to William Jones in 1786,^v there is sufficient evidence to show that Jesuit missionaries were the ones who first introduced Sanskrit and Panini, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages to Europe.^{vi}

There were a number of pioneers in the field of Sanskrit Literature, whose names and achievements had attracted the attention of such authorities as Dr. Burnell, Benfey and Prof. Max Muller. Before the end of the 16th century, Benfey remarks, they had gathered and given out to the world much information on the Vedas and Hinduism. The affinity of Indian languages to Latin and Greek was already noted by Thomas Stephens (1549-1619). In his letter to his brother Richard speaking about the variety of languages of India he writes: "Their pronunciation is not disagreeable, and their linguistic structure is allied to that of Greek and Latin."^{vii}

It may be noted that it was more through Sanskrit works or their translations that they globalised the Indian traditions to the West.^{viii} In this regard the contribution of Italian Jesuit Giacomo Fenicio (1558-1632) cannot be ignored. His "Opus Magnum", called "Livro da Seita dos Indios Orientais", is the first of the accounts on Hindu religion and customs ever written in a European language. Professor Charpentier who discovered a manuscript copy of it in the British Museum says, "The way in which Fenicio deals with the sources of Hindu mythology, betrays that scholarly spirit which is not always to be found even in later centuries. Altogether he well deserves a place among the eminent forerunners of the present European knowledge of India."^{ix}

In 1658, Miguel de Almeida, published what is probably the first book known to have been printed in the Sanskrit language. This is the “Jardim de Pastores,” printed at the Jesuit Printing Press of St. Paul’s College, Goa.^xAntao Proenca too is known for his Sanskrit scholarship.

Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), composed many Sanskrit *slokas*. According to Max Muller, de Nobili was the first European Sanskrit scholar, “who could quote from *Manu*, the *Puranas*, and *Apastamba Sutras*...[he] must have been far advanced in the knowledge of the sacred language and the literature of the Brahmins.”^{xi} He wrote several works in Sanskrit, both religious and apologetical, for the use of his Brahmin disciples, all of which unhappily, together with his accumulated stores of Sanskrit literature perished in the fire which burned down his little hermitage, when the soldiers came to seize him in 1640.

Heinrich Roth (1620–1668), the German Jesuit, after his arrival in India, devoted six long years to the study of Sanskrit, as a result of which “he obtained complete mastery of this difficult tongue.”^{xii} He wrote a Sanskrit grammar which was the first European Sanskrit grammar. His Sanskrit Grammar written for the Europeans is described as “Opus Exactissimum” (a most exact work).^{xiii} One of the manuscripts in a Vatican Library is a copy made by Roth of the *Pancatattva prakasha* of Venidatta, a metrical dictionary (*Kosha*) written in 1644. He wrote two works: one “On the Myths of the Brahmins” and especially on the “Incarnations of Vishnu”, and the other in Latin, *Elementa Linguæ Sanscret* (Elements of the Sanskrit Language), in which the Sanskrit words and texts were written in Devanagari characters. Extracts from both works were inserted by the well-known Jesuit scientist, Kircher, in his *China Illustrata* (Amsterdam, 1667),^{xiv} with portions from Hindu Mythology being illustrated with drawings by Roth on the *Avataras*, and those from the *Elementa Linguæ Sanscret* with five pages of *Devanagari* characters, including the Lord’s Prayer translated into Sanskrit.^{xv}

Johann Ernest Hanxleden (1689–1732) wrote in Latin a Sanskrit grammar on the lines of an original Sanskrit grammar work, *Sidharubam*, and as companion volumeshe compiled a Sanskrit-Portuguese dictionary and a Malayalam-Sanskrit-Portuguese dictionary.^{xvi}He was the best Sanskrit scholar, one with whom up to his time no European could compete. As Prof. Max Muller observes:

The interest excited by these accumulated treasures of learning remained necessarily barren, as long as there were no grammars, dictionaries or Sanskrit texts published to enable scholars in Europe to study Sanskrit in the same spirit in which they studied Greek and Latin.^{xvii}

According to Paolino S. Bartolomaeo, “...[Hanxleden was] the best Sanskrit scholar, one with whom up to his time no European could compete.”^{xviii}

Jean Calmette (1693-1739) seems to be the first foreigner to study the *Vedas* thoroughly. He composed a number of works in Sanskrit. John Francis Pons (1698-1753) was another Vedic scholar and collector of Vedic manuscripts. He too composed a Sanskrit grammar in Latin and sent the manuscript in 1744 to the French Academy in Paris.^{xix}

Jean Francois Pons (1698-1753) was an astronomer, a geographer, a canonist and a Sanskritist rolled into one. As early as 1734 he mastered the Sanskrit language and composed a Sanskrit grammar. He worked in the Lower Telugu region, north of Pondicherry where there were many French Jesuits.^{xx} “Father Pons,” writes Max Muller, “gives a most interesting and in general, a very accurate description of the various branches of Sanskrit literature--of the four Vedas, the Grammatical treatises, the six

systems of philosophy, and the astronomy of the Hindus. He anticipated on several points, the researches of Sir William Jones.”^{xxi}

Gaston Courteous (1691-1777) who worked round about Pondicherry was sharp to discover the relationship of Sanskrit with Latin and Greek. “To him belongs the credit” according to M. Michael Breal “of having anticipated some of the most important results of Comparative Philology by at least 50 years.”^{xxii} In 1767 he posed the question of affinity of Sanskrit to Greek and Latin in his correspondence with the French Academy. The essay he submitted to the Academy about the common origin of these three languages is cited by Max Muller as evidence to the great contribution of the French missionary to comparative philology, which became the rage among European linguists some fifty years later.^{xxiii} A good number of manuscripts can be easily attributed to Jesuits, especially those of 16th and 17th centuries, who are classified under the anonymous category.^{xxiv}

In the 19th century, two German Jesuits^{xxv} stand out: Alexander Baumgartner (1841-1910) and Joseph Dahlmann (1861-1930): Baumgartner was the editor of the Journal *Stimmen aus Maria Laach* for 36 years in Switzerland.^{xxvi} He began writing a history of world literature, six volumes of which were published during 1897-1911; Dahlmann studied oriental languages from 1891-93 in Vienna and from 1893-1900, in Berlin. He obtained his doctorate in Berlin and published a number of books. Dahlmann's book *Das Nirvana, einestudiezurvorgeschichte des Buddhismus* (Nirvana, a Study in the early history of Buddhism), 1896, is a treatise on Indian Philosophy from the *Upanisads* to Buddhism.^{xxvii} Also in the late 19th century was Robert Zimmermann (1874-1931) who, after his doctorate in Sanskrit and philology at the Friedrich-Wilhelms University, Berlin in 1913, joined the Jesuits of Bombay Province and was the head of the department of Sanskrit of St. Xavier's College, Bombay. He revised, enlarged and translated Peterson's selection of *Hymns from the Vedas*, 1921, with additional essays on the “Age of the Rigveda” and the characteristics of “Vedic Mythology”.^{xxviii}

Also among the 19th century scholars were the Calcutta School of Indologists the prominent one of whom was Pierre Johanns (1882-1955). An Oxford graduate in Sanskrit, he is chiefly known for his serial in *The Light of the East*. This type of study highlighted the teachings of Sankara, Ramanuja, Vallabha, Jiva Gosvami, Narada and Sandilya. The pioneering spirit of Johanns is to be located in the on-going process of dialogue between religions. His contribution is a stepping stone in the history of Hindu-Christian dialogue initiative in India.^{xxix}

The scholarly tradition continued into the 20th century by other Jesuits such as George Dandoy (1899-1962), Michael Ledrus (1899-1970's), William Wallace, Pierre Fallon (1912-1985), Robert Antoine (1914-1981), Julian Bayart (1905-1979), Camille Bulcke (1909-1982), the last great Vedanta scholars Richard de Smet and Francis de Marneff and more recently Sebastian Carry, Noel Sheth, George Gispert-Sauch, Anand Amaladass, and others.^{xxx}

An exhaustive and critical assessment of their contribution cannot be contained in this brief study. Be that as it may along with Sanskrit, there are many scholars who enriched other Indian languages.^{xxxi} For instance, over one hundred European scholars have contributed to Hindi literature, the most recent one being Camille Bulcke, whose magnum opus was *Ramkatha*.^{xxxii} Suffice it to say that the Western interest in Sanskrit evoked much interest in the study of the Indian traditions and languages among Indians as well.

4. Conclusion

This short paper gives only a glimpse of the contribution of European Sanskrit scholars in India. It many surprise many to know that today the greatest repositories of Sanskrit sources are not in India, but in Europe, particularly in Germany. This is because of the patronage these countries give to such scholarship. In this post-colonial globalised world of ours, a new type of colonialism of knowledge appropriation by the West is taking place under our own nose without our realising it. European universities have established several centres or chairs for accumulating knowledge about India and Asia.

An introspective question that should arise here is why Sanskrit learning has remained limited to only a few pundits in India. Whereas the pundits were given patronage by kings and zamindars, such patronage was not available for others. The Brahmins were custodians of Sanskrit as it was the religious language used in rituals. Knowledge of Sanskrit indicated control of religious power as well as social power. While on one hand Sanskrit was nurtured and preserved by the Brahmins, it remained limited without enrichment by the wider public. In fact any attempt by non-Brahmins at knowing Sanskrit religious texts was punished severely. Similarly in Christian Europe, Biblical knowledge was preserved by the clergy in Latin which was challenged by Martin Luther in early 17th century and made translations of the Bible available to the common folk in their own mother tongues. Unlike in the West in India there was no such challenge from within to break the exclusivist prerogative of the Brahmins. Even among the numerous traditional Indian scholars one finds hardly anybody who has given critical interpretations of the Sanskrit texts. India needed a renaissance to break its language fetters. Sanskrit was globalised and the richness of the Indian traditions was appreciated only after the entry of the Europeans in the field. One begins to appreciate their contribution when one learns that there are few or no Indian scholars who have translated Sanskrit texts to European languages.

End notes and References

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ⁱⁱ S. S. Pujari and S. S. Narayana. "Indian Renaissance: National Awakening," in <http://yabaluri.org/Triveni/CDWEB/indianrenaissancenationalawakeningjul84.htm> (accessed on July 6, 2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ Besides Indology studies there are many studies in the theme of East-West Interaction. Introduction of modern science to India and introduction of modern printing technology to India also ushered in Renaissance in India: see Jose Kalapura. 2006. "East-West Interaction and Development of Modern Science in India: Jesuit Mediation during 16-19th Centuries" (I. G. Khan Memorial Award for Best Paper). In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 66th Session*, Indian History Congress. Santiniketan: Vishwabharati University. pp 493-513.

^{iv} Valentine Stache-Rosen (revised by Agnes Stache-Weiske). 1990. *German Indologists: Biographies of Scholars in Indian Studies Writing in German*. New Delhi: Max Mueller Bhawan.

^v Francis P. Dinneen. 1967. *An Introduction to General Linguistics*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press. p 180.

^{vi} AnandAmaladass. 1992. "Jesuits and Sanskrit Studies" (hereafter, *Jesuits-Sanskrit Studies*). In (Eds.), Teotonio R.de Souza, & Charles J. Borges, *Jesuits in Historical Perspective*, Macao: Instituto Cultural De Macau & Goa: Xavier Center of Historical Research. p 213.

- vii Mathew Almeida. 1992. "Jesuit Contribution to Indian Languages". In (Eds.), Teotonio R.de Souza, & Charles J. Borges, op. cit., p 203; Georg Schurhammer 1963. "Thomas Stephens (1549-1619)". In (Ed.), Laszlo Szilas, S. J.. *Gesammelte Studien*, II, 2 .Lisbon and Rome: Orientalia. pp 367-376.
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- ix J. Castets, SJ. 1931. "Pioneers in European Sanskrit Scholarship". *The Indian Review* (June 1931). pp 345-351.
- x Ibid.
- xi Ibid.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Amaladas. *Jesuits-Sanskrit Studies*. op. cit. p 214.
- xiv Almeida. op. cit. p 202: The source of this information is Max Muller, as quoted by Joseph Dahlmann. 1941. "Missionary pioneers and Indian languages". *Rays Supplement*, January 1941. Trichy. p. 36.
- xv Almeida. op. cit. p.202.
- xvi Castets. Op. cit. pp 345-351.
- xvii For a comprehensive study of the life and works of Hanxleden, see James Puliurumpil. 2015. *Arnose Pathiri: A Pioneer Indologist*. Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India. Other biographies on Hanxleden are Joseph Pallath. 1994. *Arnos Padiri: (Joannes Ernestus Hanxleden, S. J., 1681-1732), The First Malayalam Poet Scholar Orientalist*. Kozhikode: Arnos Padiri Publications; Mathias Mundadan. "John Ernest Hanxleden (AronsPathiri): His Contribution to Sanskrit and Malayalam Languages and Literature". In (Ed.), Anand Amaladass. *Jesuit Presence in Indian History*. Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash. pp 182-204.
- xviii Puliurumpil, ibid. pp 123-145
- xix Amaladas, *Jesuits-Sanskrit Studies*. op. cit. p 214.
- xx Almeida, op. cit. p 204.
- xxi In the Carnatic Region (north of Pondichery to south and south-west Andhra Pradesh) many French Jesuits had worked from 1703 to 1773. For a study on their Indological works see Joe Sebastian. 2004. *The Jesuit Carnatic Mission: A Foundation of Andhra Church*. Secunderabad: Jesuit Province Society.
- xxii Amaladas, *Jesuits-Sanskrit Studies*. op. cit. p 221.
- xxiii Ibid.
- xxiv Almeida, op. cit. p 203, quoting Dahlmann, op. cit. pp 28-29.
- xxv Ibid., op. cit. p 204.
- xxvi Ibid. p 215.
- xxvii Stache-Rosen, op. cit. p 93-94.
- xxviii Ibid. pp 143-44.
- xxix Amaladas, op. cit. 217.
- xxx Ibid. p 222. For further study see *The Light of the East* (I-XII, 1892-1933), published from St. Mary's College, Kurseong.
- xxxi For an appreciation of Jesuit indologists of the 20th century, see Jesuit Scholars. 1964. *Religious Hinduism: A Presentation and Appraisal*. Allahabad: St. Paul Publications.
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