

Indology and Indologists, the study in motives (I) and people (II)

(under construction)

Part I

India has been a subject of intense interest to a wide variety of peoples from all corners of the ancient and the modern world throughout the millennia.

There are many reasons for this intense and sustained interest, not least among them being the considerable prowess of the ancient Indic in matters of scholarship, relating to the exact sciences. The Indian university system of the ancient era was world renowned and attracted student from a wide variety of countries. They were strung across the northern Indo Gangetic plain starting from Takshashila on the western end to the famed universities of Nalanda, Odantipura and Vikramshila in present day Bihar

Indology is a name given by Indologists to the academic study of the history, languages, and cultures of the Indian subcontinent. Strictly speaking it encompasses the study of the languages, scripts of all of Asia that was influenced by Indic culture. As one can imagine this encompasses almost all of present day Asia except perhaps the very northernmost reaches of Siberia. Indology as viewed by its practitioners in Europe and America is analogous to Entomology, the science of insects, in more ways than one. In both instances the subjects of the study have little say in the matter and the scope of the study. The study is always carried out to be of benefit to the people who undertake the study and there is little or no benefit to the subject of the study who may end up sacrificing his life for the 'cause'. Indological studies or the study of the Indic people in a scholarly and serious manner can be broken up into 6 major categories in some cases with overlapping time periods

1. **Babylonian and Greek (2500 BCE to 150 BCE).** The Semitic and Mediterranean world had ubiquitous contacts with the Indic. This came to a virtual stop during the Roman empire when it became the paramount Mediterranean power after the fall of Carthage. Rome remained a major trading partner of India but ceased to be interested in Indic scholarship.
2. **China and the Sinic Civilization. (2500 BCE – 1200 CE)** The interaction between the Indic and Sinic civilizations has been one of long standing, reaching back to the ancient era, and it has been a two way street, contrary to popular misconceptions. The interaction has been ubiquitous and consistent. India has borrowed much from the Sinic civilization ranging from the mundane to the sublime and vice versa. There is much work yet to be done to study the extent of this interaction, an area that was merely of tertiary interest to the European
3. **Arab and Non Arab Islamic studies of India (most of the Islamic savants who studied India did not speak Arabic as their native tongue, but were descended from converted central Asian and Indic civilizations (700 CE to 1200 CE).** In fact it can safely be said that the Arab savants had enormous respect for the capabilities of the Indics as did the Greeks like Pythagoras and Apollonius of Tyrrhenus before them. The glaring exception to this statement is the cognitive dissonance exhibited by Al Biruni, the most well known amongst the Islamic indologists, who spent a considerable portion of his life in India while expressing scathing contempt and stereotyping of Hindus in his remarks about Indians in general. That there is a contradiction between spending a great portion of one's life learning from a people and then trashing them unequivocally does not seem to bother Al Biruni
This came to a halt after the sack of Baghdad and Damascus by Hulagu, the grandson of the Mongol Great Khan Chinghiz, the most victorious conqueror of all time. It was also severely impacted when vast numbers of Indics were taken in slavery, especially able bodied men and women, and those with skills in the arts and sciences and equally large numbers were killed at the rate of 100,000 a day during and after a battle. So great were the numbers of Indian slaves who flooded the slave markets of Damascus that the price of slaves dropped dramatically and would seriously impact the economics of slavery as a profitable activity. Some have estimated the sustained decimation of the Indic population over the 5 centuries of Islamic domination of the subcontinent to be in the neighborhood of over 70 million people and for the first time India, always a highly densely populated country in relative terms to the rest of the globe, suffered a drop in population. The scholars retreated farther and farther to the south until they reached Kerala, which is where the Kerala school of astronomy and mathematics flourished for at least 300 years, producing such stalwarts as Nilakanta Somayaji, till the 1700's
4. **Pre- British colonial Catholic church dominated study of India.** It may be surprising to learn that one of the first pioneers in European Indology was the 12th Century Pope, Honorius IV.

Then as now , the primary focus of the study was not the scientific acquisition of knowledge but to arm themselves with enough facts to be able to convert the Indic population to Christianity.

5. **British colonial Indology (1780 CE – 2000 CE) which was in reality dominated by German scholars.** Interest in Indology only took shape and concrete direction after the British came to India, with the advent of the discovery of Sanskrit by Sir William Jones in the 1770's. Other names for Indology are Indic studies or Indian studies or South Asian studies. Political motivations have been always dominant in the pursuit of Indological studies during the colonial era, right from the outset since the time of Sir William Jones, when he discovered the existence of Sanskrit. One such political motivation was the need for the European to define his identity outside the framework of Semitic traditions which dominated the religious life of Europe. The notion that the North European Viking owed much of his civilization to the Mediterranean Semite was not palatable to most of the elite among the countries of Europe for reasons which we do not have the time to go into now. So, the discovery of Sanskrit was accompanied by a big sigh of relief that the languages of Europe did not after all derive from Hebrew but from an ancestor language which was initially assumed to be Sanskrit. But as the European realized that the present day practitioners of Sanskrit were not blonde and blue eyed (remember ideas of racial superiority were dominant in 18th century Europe) this was found to be equally unpalatable.

The European indologist therefore came upon the ingenious explanation that the Sanskrit culture of the subcontinent was not native to the subcontinent but was impregnated by a small band of nomadic Viking like marauders who then proceeded to transform themselves within the short space of 200 years into the intellectual class of India. This hypothesis (because that is what it was) had of course no basis in fact, but it served the purpose and killed several birds with one stone. It denied India the autochthonous legacy of the dominant culture of the subcontinent, and helped create a schism in the Indian body politic, and further implied that the native Indics were incapable of original thought and certainly were not capable of producing a language like Sanskrit. It filled the obsessive need that the European had for an ancestor that was not Semitic in origin . Lo and behold the ancestor did not come from India but from a long lost Shangrila of whom there were no survivors (so that their hypothesis could never be contradicted). Thus was born the mythical Aryan, whose only qualification was that he should hail from a land that was anywhere but India, preferably from a region not very densely inhabited or conscious of their antiquity. Further it gave the excuse for the British to claim that they were indeed the later day version of the Aryans destined to lord it over lesser, more unfortunate people by reason of the fact that they were Aryans

In fact the British presence in India was steadily increasing long before the Battle of Plassey in 1757 CE, but so great was the insularity of the colonial overlord that it took almost three hundred years for a scholar like Sir William to show up in India after Vasco da Gama landed on the coast of Goa in 1492 CE, and notice the similarities between Sanskrit and the European languages.

But the discovery of Sanskrit by Sir William and the coming of the British had a terminally fatal effect on the conduct of scientific studies in India. It cut off the Indic from his own native source of traditional learning and replaced it with the traditions of a land far away with which he had no physical contact, and could not relate, with the result that literacy fell to 6% at the turn of the 20th century . Education was tightly controlled by the government and all support to schools that did not teach English was summarily stopped , except in states that were ruled by a local Maharajah such as Travancore Cochin , Baroda and Mysore. India was turned into a vast Gulag where no ideas other than those of the British were allowed to penetrate and Indian were effectively barred from traveling to foreign lands, except on a one way trip to a distant land as indentured labor, lest they return with the subversive notions of freedom and democracy which as Churchill remarked on more than one occasion were not applicable to the subject populations of their Colonies. There was no money allocated for research and no encouragement of savants , who had little opportunity to pursue further research. So the steady supply of Indic scientists which lasted till about 1780 CE finally died out and Indic science was almost extinguished from the land.

The most telling impact that was the result of this unwanted gush of attention engendered ever since the discovery of Sanskrit, was the manner in which the Indic was viewed by the rest of the world and even more importantly the internalization of the British and European view of India by the average literate English educated Indic. Till then the Indic was widely respected throughout the world and his geographical origin was synonymous with scholarship. Today,

it is commonplace in India to deride somebody who expresses pride in his tradition and his civilization as being jingoistic.

So great was the change and so lasting in its effect that today vast numbers of Indian youth have the almost the same opinion of India and Indic traditions that the Colonial overlords had of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. There has been a massive change in the psyche of the Indic, much of it for the worse, a fact that was brought out in vivid portrayals by V S Naipaul when he coined the phrase 'the wounded civilization' in his references to the subcontinent.

Examples of the internalization of the European views of India abound in India today. We give below a sample. It is ironic that these viewpoints are usually expressed by Indics rather than non Indics.

The Indic is inherently incapable of adventurous behavior and will not venture beyond the confines of the Indian subcontinent (Kaalapaani syndrome)

The Indic is incapable of original and creative ideas. The Indic is incapable of independent thinking and is unquestioning in his adherence to authoritarian diktats such as those in the Vedic texts and is only capable of rote learning.

The caste system is an artifact of the Indic religious belief system, and that the Indic is inherently opposed to egalitarian ideas and is wedded to the racial and ethnic stratification of his own society.

The Indic is especially unique and egregious in the manner in which he exploits his fellow Indics

The Indic is fatalistic and will not make an effort to change his destiny which is written in stone the moment he is born

The Indic is lazy and indolent

The Indic has no sense of history and is even poorer at keeping records of his historical past

The germ of such a vast change in psyche was the goal of Thomas Babington Macaulay and he would have been rather pleased to see the consequences of his minute on education where he proposed changing the medium of instruction to English in the 1830's in order to produce a class of Brown Englishman who would occupy positions intermediate between those of the Colonial overlords and the unwashed masses of the subcontinent. In the same vein, HH Wilson, the first occupant of the Boden Chair in Sanskrit, wrote as follows,

"From the survey which has been submitted to you, you will perceive that the practical religion of the Hindus is by no means a concentrated and compact system, but a heterogeneous compound made up of various and not infrequently incompatible ingredients, and that to a few ancient fragments it has made large and unauthorized additions, most of which are of an exceedingly mischievous and disgraceful nature. It is, however, of little avail yet to attempt to undeceive the multitude; their superstition is based upon ignorance, and until the foundation is taken away, the superstructure, however crazy and rotten, will hold together."

Power over a vast area like India does strange things to people, one of which is the loss of 'common sense', not to mention the loss of humility, and one can see the process of creating the mythological Indian has already begun as early as 1833, the process of remaking the Indic mindset had commenced in earnest.

6. **Indic studies by native Indics when the Indic tradition miraculously resurrected itself shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century from an almost comatose condition (1900 CE to the present)**

So we come to the sixth and current period of Indological studies. The European, with few exceptions continued to study the Indic past as if the present day practitioners did not exist. In this the indologists tried to emulate Egyptology and the study of Meso American civilizations. In both these instances, the Europeans could say anything they liked without being challenged by survivors of the tradition and get away with it, because there were no survivors after the routine scourging of native populations using the well entrenched twin techniques - first with the sword and then the Holy book to erase all prior traditions. They studied India in the same vein, making untenable assumptions and hypothesis and then indulged in circular arguments that anything that does not fit the assumption is invalid

But the Hindu is a strange creature, imbued with the genetic longevity of the cockroach and the intellectual hardiness that comes from millennia of tradition devoted to scholarship. Indics were the first to codify the principle of acquisition of knowledge known now by the name of epistemology, and they resisted the imposition of a history and a narrative that was substantially at variance from their Puranic traditions. These principles of acquisition of knowledge are alluded to in my booklet on Dhaarmik traditions and include Perception and Observation (Pratyaksha), Anumaana (inference), Comparison and Analogy (Upamaana), shabda (acceptance, though not necessarily uncritical acceptance, of the Word as manifested in the ancient scriptures, Arthapaati (implication) and anupalabdi (non apprehension and skepticism in the face of non-apprehension).

The systematic approach, combined with the methodology of learning recommended by the Upanishads namely, the triune method of *shravana*, *manana* and *nididhyasana* forms the core of the approach to all kinds of knowledge, whether it be Paara Vidya or Apaara Vidya (see Glossary). *Shravana* refers basically to hearing, but also includes reading, discussions and the like. *Manana* is contemplation of what has been studied or heard. *Nididhyasana* is concentration on the subject to the exclusion of everything else. It may not always be possible nor advisable to practice multitasking, which has become de rigueur in this age of rapid technological change. Usually, the initial knowledge about anything has to be acquired through a guru, because he is the dependable authority on the subject. *Manana* and *Nididhyasana* depend on one's own effort, with some guidance from the guru. The role of the teacher is only as a guidepost. The journey has to be undertaken by us with our own efforts.

It is this comprehensive approach to the acquisition of knowledge that has given the edge to the Hindu vis a vis other civilizations over the millennia and is catalyzing the reclamation of the high ground in the field of Indic studies. This is not to say that the Modern Indic should ignore the work done by others in this field, but it does mean the converse that indologists outside India, can no longer ignore the legitimate claims to scholarship of Indic savants in the study of their own History. Let us hope that as we go from here that he, the Western Indologist will abandon the politically motivated approach that he has taken till hitherto and will accord the discerning Indic savant the same consideration and apply objective criteria to the studies undertaken by those who are of a European background. Certainly it means that he should eschew the use of the convenient and stereotypical characterization of anything that he does not like as being a product or a conspiracy of the Hindutva or a Hindu nationalist.

In reality, there is a basic contradiction in the western characterization of the Hindu and the pejorative use of the word Hindu nationalist. The Hindu faith or Sanaatana Dharma has often been characterized in my view with adequate justification, as being too eclectic and all encompassing. In fact in the quote above Hyman Wilson characterizes it as being 'heterogeneous and contradictory'. And yet, there is the constant and ubiquitous drumbeat in the use of the word Hindu nationalist, which implies an exclusionary stance and narrow mindedness. To the followers of Plato and Socrates in the Occidental world , I ask, well which is it, eclectic and all encompassing weltanschauung, or exclusionist and narrow minded.

