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ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND MODERN CHALLENGES: SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES TODAY

ABSTRACT In order to show the mutual importance and usefulness of classical and modern Indology to each other, the author presents a series of cases, where ancient things are present (and often reinterpreted and modified) in modern India, in fields such as religion and philosophy, social hierarchy, popular entertainment, language and linguistics and traditions of scholarship.

Keywords: Indology, South Asia, Sanskrit, Hinduism

The attempts to understand other cultures can be seen in many ways. There are many who are not interested at all and remain content with the adopted, stereotypical ideas (which can be surprisingly old). But for those who are actively studying culture it can become a passion. According to Edward Said's *Orientalism* it is a form of imperialism.[1] A scholar, he claims, makes an attempt to understand another culture in order to define it, to predict its ways and thus to control it. This may happen, but in my eyes it seems rather to be the viewpoint of a layman (or politician) than that of a scholar. Notwithstanding Said's view, the need to understand has long been a major factor in cultural studies. And in any case, real understanding can only happen at an equal level.

South Asian studies can proudly count more than 200 years of history. But for a long time the discipline has been faced with a serious problem. The dominating trend was classical Indology and everything else was more or less discarded. Indological scholars in the West, together with many Indian colleagues, tried to understand India as it was a thousand years ago or even earlier. The only dialogue that was possible was about its historical and philological interpretation.

In the last 50 years this has much changed. There is still a place for classical Indology – I am a classical Indologist myself – but only as one part of South Asian studies. And the majority of classical Indologists, I hope, are no longer considering modern South Asia through history only. In the first half of the 20th century it was still common to explain social relations in modern South Asia with theoretical quotations from the works such as the *Mānavadharmaśāstra*. Now, of course, such an attempt would no longer pass as scholarship.

But as I said, classical Indology still occupies a place in South Asian studies. However, it seems that at many universities classical and modern studies are completely separate and often consider each other as rivals and enemies. This is sad and silly, although perhaps understandable because of the continuous competition for the same insufficient resources. But an exchange and collaboration between classical and modern studies would in fact enormously benefit both parties. While history cannot and should not define our understanding of modern South Asia, in many cases it can deepen it in a very useful way. I would like to present a few examples of this phenomenon.[2]

In the Finnish detective story *Sopimatonta kuolla yliopistolla* (Improper to die in the university) published in 1943 by Matti Hälli, a Docent of Aesthetics defends the meagre amount of students attending his lectures (where the murder was committed) by saying that the Professor of Sanskrit has even fewer. A historian of education notes here the delicate sense of the author: at that time there was no such Professor at the University of Helsinki, and Sanskrit was taught by a Docent (Y.M. Biese, who certainly

[1] E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, London 1985, passim. See also Said's criticism by R. Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing. The Orientalists and their Enemies*, London 2007.

[2] The first version of the following text in Finnish, was my inaugural lecture on 22nd November 2006. The revised English version was read on 12 September 2007 at the seminar on "Doing Business with India" organised by the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the University of Tallinn and the Embassy of India. Julie Uusinarkaus has kindly checked my English.

had very few students).[3] And this was of course the author's point: the exotic subject attracted very few students. However, this has completely changed after Hälli's time. Even the name of the discipline was changed to South Asian Studies more than a quarter of a century ago. Besides the traditional – and still important – Sanskrit, we have for many years also been teaching the two major modern languages, Hindi and Tamil, and our dissertations deal as often with modern society as with the classical literature and religion. Nevertheless, until recently it was seen as a sort of exotic curiosity even in the Faculty.

In 1998 I was on my way to the International Sanskrit Conference in Bangalore. On the transfer flight from Copenhagen to Delhi I was sitting next to a man who turned out to be a Finn from Sweden and a director of the Eriksson's phone factory in Bangalore. In the late 1990s I had also noted the growing interest in India's rapidly developing economy in Germany. But in Finland, nobody was interested; nobody believed that India could have any economic importance. Now even the Finns have finally discovered the immense economic potential of India and a dozen or more Finnish companies are working in India. Today, India is capable of competing, especially taking into account its low costs of production and high technical skills. Nevertheless, we must also remember the great problems involved. More than 70% of the population still lives in poverty. In the shadow economy there is no minimum salary, no social security and no public health service, and certainly no mobile phones and Internet services.[4]

But South Asia is not only important from the economical point of view. The rich and ancient civilisation of the subcontinent forms an important part of the world's cultural heritage, and in many respects it is still vigorous despite the modern challenges. The hoary antiquity and the modern age: both are important elements in present-day South Asia. I shall proceed to give a few examples shedding light on this situation.

The dispute about the mosque of Ayodhya was noted in the newspapers everywhere in Europe. The almost 500-year-old Babri Mosque of Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh was built on a spot that according to the Hindus was the supposed birthplace of Rāma, the legendary hero and an earthly form of the god Viṣṇu. The ancient Sanskrit epic *Rāmāyaṇa* and the tradition that a temple once existed in that exact same place were offered as evidence of the argument. Emotions grew hot with the collision between the practice of half a millennium and the legend of two millennia and more. The situation grew critical in 1992, when Hindu groups intruded into the area and demolished the mosque in order to build a temple instead. The state had to intervene, but the dispute is still unresolved, and the place is still blocked off.

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[3] On the history of Indian studies in Finland see P. Aalto, *Oriental Studies in Finland 1828-1918*, Helsinki 1971 (*The History of Learning and Science in Finland 1828-1918*) and K. Karttunen, 'South Asian Studies in Finland,' *Newsletter of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies*, No. 7 (2002).

[4] However, mobile phones have been a great success in India as Dr. S. Tenhunen ('Mobile Technology in the Village: ICTs, Culture, and Social Logistics in India,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2008), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.00515.x>) has shown in the case of West Bengal villages. It seems to be common that the more wealthy have phones which their neighbours can use in exchange for a small fee.

Religious feelings are also involved in other questions. The pollution of the Ganges is a serious problem, but there are those who claim that the holy river has the ability to purify all pollution, and therefore no measures are needed. The plan to improve the passage between India and Sri Lanka has been criticised, because it would destroy the legendary bridge of Rāma (Rāmsetu), which is described in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

When we speak of the caste system, Europeans often confuse two parallel systems. On the one hand, there are the five ancient classes or *varṇas*: Brahmans, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, Śūdras, and Caṇḍālas (also called Dalits or untouchables) as the fifth, although traditional lists tend to leave them unmentioned and perceive them as outcastes. On the other hand, the proper castes or *jātis* form another hierarchical system[5] which also includes the Dalits. These castes are defined by profession and to some extent also by religious or ethnic affiliation; they share the same rules of purity and food, and they are usually endogamous.

Independent India abolished caste discrimination as early as 1950. In spite of this, the caste system is still a reality, especially in the villages, where different castes often live in separate quarters. In towns the caste is less important, but still the majority of marriages take place inside the caste. Generally, the higher castes tend to be conservative, while the lower ones would like to finally be rid of the system, which once had some important social functions, but is hardly in compatibility with the demands of the modern world.

Let me give an example of the situation. I remember an occasion in a Keralan village when a low-caste worker was explaining something important, humbly staying in the courtyard, and the Brahman householder was listening to him on his elevated veranda. Later on, I discussed this with the Brahman, who explained that old customs are still followed in the village. But, he continued, when the same low-caste worker becomes rich enough to offer academic education to his children, the situation will change. A lawyer, a physician, a teacher – an educated person has in a way moved outside the system, and when he or she visits his or her home village, he or she can even be invited to visit Brahmans in spite of the low birth.

It is true that the matter has another side, too: In recent times there has again been a growing criticism of the number of posts created to guarantee a share of study and professional positions for the *scheduled castes and tribes,* as they are officially called. Many other groups feel that their own position has deteriorated through this.

The traditional ways of the caste society are hardly appreciated by those discriminated against by its rules. In colonial times those of low caste were often denied access to temples. Although this practice has been discontinued, the Dalits started a new tradition in the 1950s, adopting Buddhism as their religion. The idea came from the late Dalit leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), who decided that Buddhism was a good choice for his people as it is an Indian religion without the

[5] The classical study of the caste hierarchy is L. Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus. The Caste System and its Implications*, London–Chicago 1970.

caste discrimination. In this respect, an icon such as Gandhi was much too traditional to be favoured by the Dalits.

Religion is perhaps the most important form of tradition. When millions of pilgrims come to Prayāg to celebrate the Kumbh Melā festival, this Hindu celebration is noted in the international news. Pilgrimages are traditionally an important and popular part of Hinduism, but nowadays, in addition to holy places, the areas where famous film stars live have also become popular destinations for pilgrims. Sometimes it is possible to have a guided group travel including both, the religious and the film pilgrimage (in Tirupati and in Chennai). This is not very remarkable, as in the West, too, the worship of film stars has often been similar to the worship of saints.[6]

The ancient Vedic rituals were established three thousand years ago, and often they have little in common with later Hinduism. Nevertheless, they are still used in many rites of passage (*saṁskāra*) such as weddings and funerals. Sometimes they are modified and simplified to meet the demands of the fast-paced modern society. Along with the old Sanskrit handbooks there are now short manuals where the ritual instructions inserted between the obligatory Sanskrit mantras are given in one of the modern languages, or, for the benefit of expatriates, in English.[7] Still, in India there are also puritans who strongly oppose this kind of development.

The Hindu religion is especially present in temples, ceremonies and pilgrimages, but Hindu mythology is also very much present in the modern entertainment industry, for example, in movies, TV series, comics[8] and cartoons. Religious prints and posters are often seen in houses and shops. The popular dramatic dances such as kāthak, bharatanāṭyam and kathakali illustrate scenes from Hindu mythology, following the rules of classical Indian aesthetics.

Past and present also meet in language. In every census a few thousand Indians still claim Sanskrit as their mother tongue, but their position seems rather marginal, and in any case it seems that we could as well speak of the "father tongue".[9] It is much more important that Sanskrit has become a crucial lexical element in Hindi and several other modern languages, used to create new terms to substitute the currently used Western loans with Indian words. This is done much in the same way as Latin (and Latinized Greek) is used in Europe. In Pakistan, in a similar way the Urdu vocabulary is developed with the addition of Arabic words, and in this way the originally almost

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6 K. Karttunen, 'Pilgrimage as Business in Traditional India' in R. Gothóni (ed.), *Pilgrims and Travellers in Search of the Holy*, Oxford 2010.

7 I have collected some examples in Hindi, Tamil, Malayālam and English; without doubt they can be found in all the major languages of India.

8 Note especially the great popularity of the Mumbai-based mythological Amar Chitra Katha comics starting in the late 1960s. A more recent case is the science fiction comic *Ramayan 3392 AD* written by Shamik Dasgupta and drawn by Abhishek Singh and Satish Tayade. I thank my student Ms. Johanna Virmavirta for this information.

9 H.H. Hock has studied the living Sanskrit in Varanasi and Lucknow. See H.H. Hock, 'Spoken Sanskrit in Uttar Pradesh – a Sociolinguistic Profile,' *Journal of Orientology. Lokaprajñā*, Vol. 2: *Prof. N.S. Rāmānuja Tātācārya Felicitation Volume* (1988).

identical languages Hindi and Urdu are drifting farther apart. Thus, for instance, an aeroplane is in Hindi known by the Sanskrit term *vimān*,[10] which originally referred to the heavenly palaces of the gods. In Urdu the usual term is the Persian compound *havāī jahāz* 'air-ship' or even *tayyāra*, which is derived from the Arabic verb for flying. 'Democracy' in Hindi translates as *loktantra*, in Urdu *jumhūriyat*; 'linguistics' in Hindi translates as *bhāṣāvigyān*, in Urdu *lisāniyāt*. In colloquial language, a telephone is simply referred to with the English term *ṭelīfon* or briefly *fon*, but in Hindi there is also the Sanskrit derivative *dūr-bhāṣ* which means 'speaking from afar.' For *reḍiyā* – 'radio' – the Sanskrit compound *ākāś-vāṇī*, originally referring to a divine voice heard from heaven, was adopted.

We must also consider the scholarly traditions. An independent tradition of Indian science developed more than two millennia ago and achieved some important results, especially in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, aesthetics, linguistics and philosophy. Some Western historians hesitate here to use the word "science," but these traditions were in fact at least as scientific as those of Medieval Europe's, and in some respects even more. Our "Arabic" numbers are in fact Indian, and names such as Āryabhaṭa, Brahmagupta and Bhāskara have an established place in the general history of mathematics.[11] On the less positive side, I must mention the pseudo-science of astrology which, although originally learnt from the Greeks, soon became and still is enormously popular in South Asia. An astrologer is often consulted about marriage plans, important business deals or travels.

In the West, Indian philosophy is often, and with little knowledge, stigmatised as mere religious metaphysics,[12] but even in the classical age many philosophers – especially Buddhists and Naiyāyikas – studied the problems of epistemology and logic independently, more or less uninfluenced by religion.

Indians can boast about having invented phonetics. The traditional order of Indian alphabets conveys an exact analysis of the place and mode of articulation. Modern Western linguistics has received seminal ideas from the grammar of Pāṇini and from the language philosophy of Patañjali and Bhartṛhari. In the first millennium, Indian aestheticians developed sophisticated theories which still help us to better understand modern literature, theatre and even Indian cinema. Two centuries ago, European physicians still had much to learn from their Indian colleagues in the fields such as dietetics, hygiene and plastic surgery. Some of the traditional disciplines are still vigorous – Ayurvedic medicine is taught in many universities – but India has also long had an honourable position in the development of modern science. Names

[10] I give here the terms in their Hindi form. The Sanskrit equivalents for these are *vimāna, lokatantra, bhāṣāvijñāna, dūrabhāṣa* and *ākāśavāṇī*. But not all of them are used as compounds in Sanskrit.

[11] I learned these names as a high school student in the 1960s. I had not yet found my life-long interest in South Asia, but in my algebra textbook there was a historical appendix where the importance of Indian mathematics was made very clear. I do not rely entirely on my memory, I still have the book and I have checked the text. The author was the Finnish mathematician Kalle Väisälä (1893-1968).

[12] The history of Western response to Indian philosophy is aptly discussed in W. Halbfass, *India and Europe. An Essay in Understanding*, Albany, N.Y. 1988.

such as the physicist C.V. Raman and the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan easily come to mind, not to mention the most recent developments in the field of computer science.

Tradition and modernity – we must take both into account in order to be able to understand India and its culture, and quite often this interaction of the old and the new is the most interesting and yielding field of study. Because of this, Sanskrit is still an important tool if we want to penetrate deeper than the mere surface. South Asian studies have their roots in linguistics, but the study of texts and culture has long been a fully recognised part of it. It is true that disciplines such as comparative religion, social and cultural anthropology, history and politics, etc. may study South Asia from their own methodical viewpoints, but our strength is in languages. We learn and apply the methods of cultural studies, but without languages the results would be very modest.

Language is the tool that truly brings us close to what we study, but here we must also note a risk. It is not our task, although some people seem to expect it from us, to decide what South Asians would say, do and think. Our research gives us important information about language, civilisation and society, but if it is used in order to find out features of the rather imaginary, but now again regrettably fashionable idea of a national character (*Volksgeist*), we have gone astray and become Orientalists in the most negative sense of the word.[13] When categorical and stereotypical definitions cannot adequately describe five million Finns or 1.3 million Estonians, how could this be ever possible with more than one billion Indians?

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[13] E.W. Said, *Orientalism* and K. Karttunen, 'Some Thoughts about Edward Said, Hindutva, and Western Indology' in I. Milewska (ed.), *Future of Indology*, Kraków 2008 (*Cracow Indological Studies*, 10).

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