

The Nay Science. A History of German Indology, by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee

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BOOK REVIEW

The Nay Science. A History of German Indology, by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, 512 pp., £27.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780199931361

If one thing is truly clear after reading this distorting and tendentious book, it is that this is anything but a history of German Indology. The tome begins with a critical survey of the earliest German publications on the *Mahābhārata* (basically dealing with only two scholars, Christian Lassen and Adolf Holzmann), and then moves on to examine the work of some half a dozen scholars on the *Bhagavadgītā* from the late nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century, which forms the bulk of the book. The whole thing has then been packaged (and successfully sold) as a history of German Indology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But how can a work of such limited scope claim to be a history of a rather vast academic discipline? It is *the method*, the authors say (p. 1 and passim); by describing the method, they claim to give us the essence of German Indology. This is all very convenient: we no longer have to bother reading thousands upon thousands of tiresome pages to grasp the history of German Indology (whatever that may be, see below), *the method* will disclose its dark secrets to us. However, there is a tiny problem here: Indology—German Indology included—does not have a method, or rather, it does not have a single method, as inexplicably assumed by the authors.

To understand the absurdity of their claim, imagine that a selective review of scholarly studies of *Hamlet* in Germany was presented as a history of the studies in that country of English language, literature, history and culture as a whole, including English grammar, lexicography and dialects, manuscripts, inscriptions and paleography, epic and court poetry, novels and theatre, philosophy, religion and ritual, history, numismatics, architecture, art history, and so forth. It is hard to imagine that such a bizarre assertion would pass muster with even the most indulgent of referees, let alone be published by a reputable publisher like Oxford University Press, but nowadays anything seems possible in South Asian Studies. It is surprising that a respected scholar like Alf Hiltebeitel, who evidently has very little firsthand knowledge of German Indology, endorses and praises this book on its back cover (and perhaps, significantly, no one else). Incidentally, the authors of the book, Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, recently edited two volumes of his papers.

Now, what is this ‘method’ practised by German Indologists? Before we answer this question, perhaps we should first ask who those German Indologists are, a question which the authors never bother to address. In fact, German Indology is nothing more than a fuzzy construct (see Hanneder, 2011).¹ German Indologists cannot simply be defined as German nationals working in the field of Indology, because Lassen, for instance, one of the main villains figuring in this book, was a Norwegian who established his academic career in Bonn, at a time when it was governed by Prussia (would that make him a Prussian Indologist?). Should we regard German nationals who spent most of their working lives in Great Britain, as for instance Max Müller, as German Indologists? Or should one say rather that German Indologists are scholars of Indology employed at institutions located within the borders of the German state? But since there was no German state before national unification in 1871, to which political borders should we confine ‘German Indology’? Do we also want to include scholars

1. Jürgen Hanneder, ‘Pretence and Prejudice’, in *Indologica Taurinensia*, Vol. 37 (2011), pp. 130–1.

living in the Habsburg Empire? But that would include almost all of Eastern Europe! Or should we say that Indologists writing in the German language are German Indologists? However, this would include not only Swiss, (modern) Austrian and Czech scholars, but also Dutch and Scandinavian, and even some Hungarian, Russian, Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian scholars, depending on their time of life.

So much for 'German'; what about 'Indology'? It is obvious that the authors' use of the term is a bit anachronistic and even more erroneous. The term 'Indologie', and its English counterpart 'Indology', seems to have been coined in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; the word does not appear in the 'I' volume of the Grimm dictionary of 1876, and its earliest source in the OED dates from 1882. The term only came into wider use in Germany after World War II. Prior to that, during the period treated in this book, the terms 'Sanskrit-Philologie' and 'Indische Philologie' were far more common. It is not by accident that the best and most renowned history of the discipline, by Ernst Windisch, which the authors blissfully ignore, is titled *Geschichte der Sanskrit-Philologie und Indischen Altertumskunde* (1917). As far as I can see, none of the scholars discussed in the book actually held a chair of 'Indologie' or was employed at a department or institute of 'Indologie'. The term became more prevalent after the war precisely in order to emphasise that the study of (mainly pre-modern) South Asia was (and had been) broader in scope than 'mere' Sanskrit philology. But no matter whether one uses 'Sanskrit-Philology' or 'Indology' or 'Study of Indian Antiquity', the discipline under discussion never 'largely defined itself in terms of a specific method (the historical-critical method or the text-historical method)' (p. 1). This is a pure fabrication on the part of the authors.

Assuming that 'German Indology' can nevertheless be understood as a meaningful and appropriate term, what about *the method*? It is obvious that the 'method' described by the authors simply refers to textual stratification aimed at retrieving an earlier, if possible original, form of a given work. As such, it was already practised by the Alexandrine scholars as early as the third century BCE and was already applied to the Old Testament by Origen, if not before. In its modern form it was practised in Europe after the Renaissance not only by 'Germans', but also by French, Italian, British, American, Russian, Japanese and—to the authors' chagrin—even some Indian scholars who were infected by the bug of 'German Indology'. There is nothing particularly German about this method, except perhaps that when it comes to classical South Asian Studies in Europe there were more scholars writing in German than in any other language, and the output in this language was consequently larger. McGetchin counts 47 professors of Sanskrit or 'Aryan' studies that included Indology as a major component in Germany alone in 1903, not including those in other German-speaking countries or Scandinavian or Dutch scholars writing in German.² While the stratification of the Indian epic into earlier and later phases, the issue at the core of this book, is not a current concern of any particular German scholar, in the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa* it is currently undergoing the most vigorous examination by, for instance, John Brockington, emeritus of the University of Edinburgh, and arguably the greatest living scholar on Indian epic literature.

Now, turning to the stratification of the *Mahābhārata*, the vast majority of scholars, not just the 'German' ones, assume that the text has gradually grown to its present size (seven times that of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together, as the cliché goes) in a process that took several hundred years. One can sympathise with the authors' claim that the various attempts to stratify the text, and more specifically the *Bhagavadgītā*, tell us more about the stratifiers than about the stratified. However, the fact that we cannot untie the knot does not mean that there is no knot. In their blanket rejection of all attempts to come to grips with the different strata of the text, the

2. Douglas T. McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth in Modern Germany* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p. 17.

authors have chosen against all probability to endorse the position of Madeleine Biardeau, who largely incurred amused reactions to her claim that the text had been composed by a single person. (The only person I know who tries to defend Biardeau's opinion is Alf Hiltebeitel.) Biardeau's claim is highly implausible, not only because of the daunting size of the composition and its lack of coherence on many levels, but also because of such trifles as the inclusion of two considerably different *parvan* lists, i.e., lists that serve as tables of contents (there are actually three of them, the third one being fragmentary).³ Should we assume that the single author of the *Mahābhārata* forgot that he had already written a *parvan* list and so wrote another one? Apart from this, neither Biardeau nor the authors tell us which *Mahābhārata* was written by a single author. Was it the *Mahābhārata* of the Northeastern, Northwestern or the Southern recension? Or might it possibly be the one reconstructed in the critical edition (which employs to a considerable extent *the method*—even though our authors seem unaware of this)?

The problems of the coherence of the *Mahābhārata* are present in a nutshell in the *Bhagavadgītā*. Looking alone at the divine figure of Krishna, we can discern at least three different theological positions: theism, pantheism, and panentheism (the world being inside God). Many scholars have assumed, therefore, that the text is composed of chronologically different layers and tried to disentangle them in order to retrieve the original form and theological doctrine at the core of this text. Some have considered the theistic doctrine to be the core, others the pantheistic one, and still others hold that the entire theological perspective is a late addition and that Krishna was originally an epical human hero; still others read their racist theories of Aryan supremacy into the text, as into the *Mahābhārata* in general. In hindsight, it is easy to point to the weaknesses and prejudices of these pioneering, often over-confident studies. However, it may be presumed that they were not all as wrong as the authors assume. It is quite probable that computer-based analyses of metrical patterns and other statistical features will be able to reveal structures that will provide a more robust basis for future attempts at stratification. A recent preliminary study indicates that the *Bhagavadgītā* belongs to the same strata as the philosophical sections of the *Mahābhārata*, which is to say, the philosophical treatises of Mokṣaparvan towards the end of the epic.

Viewed as a whole, this is a sad book; and it is sad that many readers may be misled into thinking they are holding a scholarly book about 'German Indology' in their hands. Actually, the book is simply a clumsy attempt to avenge an insult. One of the two authors, Vishwa Adluri, is a failed PhD student of the late 'German Indologist' Michael Hahn, who Adluri promptly accused of standing in the tradition of Nazi scholarship (incidentally, it may be mentioned that Hahn, who died in 2014, was of Jewish extraction). This explains, I think, the nasty and indignant tone that runs throughout the book, which may be seen as a personal vendetta against 'German Indology'. It might also be worth mentioning that as a result of his complaint, Adluri was awarded a PhD in ('German?') Indology from the University of Marburg without any 'German' Indologist evaluating his work (see Hahn, 2011).⁴

Looking for the origins of 'German Indology', the authors proceed like the famous drunkard in reverse. The coin is under the streetlamp, but they go looking for it in the dark alleys of Protestantism and biblical philology. The nature and origin of 'Indology' were already clearly stated in A.W. Schlegel's founding essay, 'Über den gegenwärtigen Zustand der Indischen Philologie', which marks the beginning of 'German Indology' as an academic discipline: 'If the study of Indian literature is to thrive, the principles of classical philology have to be thoroughly applied to it, and that with the most scientific rigor'. ('Soll das Studium der indischen

3. John Brockington, 'The Spitzer Manuscript and the *Mahābhārata*', in Eli Franco and Monika Zin (eds), *From Turfan to Ajanta* (Bhairahawa, Rupandehi: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2010), pp. 75–88.


4. Supplement by Michael Hahn, in Jürgen Hanneder, 'Pretence and Prejudice', in *Indologica Taurinensia*, Vol. 37 (2011), pp. 136–7.

Literatur gedeihen, so müssen durchaus die Grundsätze der classischen Philologie, und zwar mit der wissenschaftlichsten Schärfe, darauf angewandt werden’.) This opinion was still widespread and taken for granted when I first came to Germany in the early 1980s. It lasted as long as classical philology itself was able to maintain its prestige, until the repeated waves of neo-liberalism, secondary school and university reform, and the cultural turn in the humanities marginalised it, and with that Indology as well. In other words, ‘German Indology’ is not, at its core, a ‘nay’ science; rather, ‘German Indologists’ wanted to accomplish for India what their fellow philologists had accomplished for Ancient Greece and Rome—and presumably, some of them still have this aim. Looking back at what they have accomplished over the last 200 years, they have not done such a poor job.

The great French Indologist Sylvain Lévi famously said that ‘India has no history’ (‘l’Inde n’a pas d’histoire’). By this, he did not mean of course, as he was often misinterpreted as saying, that things always remain the same in India, but rather that premodern India was not in possession of its own history. It created neither a historiography (though one might insist on a few exceptions), nor archives, nor archeology, nor other means to preserve and remember its own history. Consider how much the most learned Indian intellectuals, the pandits, *ācāryas*, etc., knew around the year 1800 about Indian history and civilisation, and how much we know now. The difference is due to Indology, obviously not only ‘German’, although the ‘German’ contribution has been decisive. The *Bhagavadgītā* itself is a good example. It was largely unknown in India in the nineteenth century except in Vedānta circles, and its current popularity is rightly considered to be a case of the ‘pizza effect’ (pizza became popular in Italy only after and as a result of becoming popular abroad); it was barely known even in Vaishnava circles (imagine the Hare Krishnas without the *Gītā*!). Gandhi, for instance, who contributed greatly to its current popularity and the image of its ‘sanctity’, first heard about it when he was in England, and first read it in an English translation.

So what is the ‘nay science’ in all of the above? Surprisingly, the authors fail to make it entirely clear what exactly the title of their book refers to. If I understand them correctly, they use the label to characterise a lack of respect for the ‘traditional’ and/or ‘indigenous’ way(s) of reading Sanskrit texts. This would include both the indigenous *pāṇḍītya* readings as well as personally committed religious and political readings, like Gandhi’s reading of the *Gītā*, which the authors specifically endorse. In other words, anything goes when one instrumentalises the text, that is, anything except a careful and critical scholarly reading of it. This tendency has become more pronounced with the post-colonial turn, which endorses defensive, indigenist readings of such texts. I am not sure whether the authors realise that what they recommend amounts to an open invitation for reading and using a text like the *Gītā* as a justification of the abominable concepts and practices of caste distinction, Hindu nationalism, Brahmin supremacy, Right-wing militarism and fascism, to mention but a few possibilities.

Under such circumstances, we as ‘German’ and other Indologists may gladly accept the epithet ‘nay science’ for our discipline; we gladly say ‘no’ to this promotion of ignorance, shallowness, arbitrariness, prejudice and eccentricity by the authors, and say ‘yes’ to serious, methodically sound and sober scholarship free of allegedly ‘traditional’ and political constraints by Hindutva ideology and the like.

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