

Discovery of Sanskrit by Western Scholars

The great (ironic) discovery by the Western Scholars in the late eighteenth-century that Sanskrit is related to Latin, Greek, Germanic, and Celtic languages revolutionized the European linguistics studies.

Sir William Jones, a British judge and scholar working in India, summed up the nature and implications of the findings in his 1786 address to the Royal Asiatic Society:

‘.... The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than Greek, more copious [having more cases] than the Latin, and more refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of the verbs and in the forms of the grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philosopher could have examined them all three,

without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason ... for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtick ... had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family...

This discovery led to several decades of hard and intensive philological work in the area of historical-comparative.

This also paved the ways for the developments in historical linguistics during the nineteenth century.

By studying sound correspondences from an ever-increasing number of languages, linguists eventually ascertained that most of the languages from Europe, Persian and the northern part of India belong to a single family, which has come to be known as **Indo-European languages**.

EARLY SANSKRIT INTEREST IN EUROPE:

We know that India has attracted the Western world since antiquity.

However, since the invasion of Alexander, we have information on India and Indian religion in Western literature. The main source of information has been travelers' accounts.

We could go on enumerating these accounts, but our interest is restricted here to 15th century onwards and up to 18th century.

Vasco de Gama opened the road to India in 1498. And we know what followed next i.e. Goa went into the hands of Portuguese in 1510.

Portuguese authorities were very meticulous in noting their observations about the people of new colony.

Portuguese authorities, which also consisted scholars of all kinds, were very meticulous in their observations about the people of new colony.

Observations noted by early officers, travelers and traders have given a very rich and detailed account and information about Hinduism.

Albuquerque [alb-kur-kee], the first governor of Goa mentioned that there existed a Brahminic which he claimed as a “Scientific” language- named Sanskrit.

He also mentioned that the structure of some sounds and words of this language is very much similar to that of Latin.

Manoel d’Oliviera an Indian convert was probably the first to translate some portions of *Gnaneshwari* to Portuguese.

(The *Jñaneshwari* : ज्ञानेश्वरी) is a commentary on [Bhagavad Gita](#) written by [Marathi](#) saint and poet [Dnyaneshwar](#) during the 13th century at age 16).

A British Jesuit Thomas Stephens (1549- 1619) arrived in Goa in 1579 and was one of the early European to master an Indian language i.e. Konkani.

He also studied Sanskrit. Later, he wrote a grammar of Konkani language of Goa and many other books on Christianity.

Filippo Sassetti was another merchant who came to India during 1583 to 1588.

He also expressed in detail about the uniqueness of Sanskrit and also about its linguistic affiliations.

He died in Cochin at the age of 48. He probably is the first European to translate Ayurvedic text into Latin with the help of a Brahmin.

Garcia de Orta was a court physician of a Portuguese viceroy of Goa. He learned Sanskrit to benefit from the knowledge of Ayurveda and collected useful information on medicinal plants and published it in a book in 1563.

Abraham Rogerius was a clergy in the service of Dutch East India company.

He wrote a book titled *De open-deure tot het Verborgene Heydendom* with the help of two Brahmins Padmanabha and Damarsa, in the year 1651. This book provided rich information of Hindu religious beliefs and the ways of life.

This is also the first book which gives a detail account of iconographical features of the Hindu temples including the main images of the temple.

Padmanabha, the language consultant of Abraham Rogerius, offered a translation of Bhartrihari's *Nitishatak* into Portuguese which Rogerius translated into Dutch which was soon translated into French. This is also one of the very early Sanskrit text into a European language.

Heinrich Roth (1620- 1668) a German Jesuit arrived in Goa in 1652. He learnt Persian, Kannada and Urdu during his stay at Goa.

Later, Roth went to Agra and became a head of a Jesuit college.

He learnt Sanskrit in Agra and acquired so much fluency in Sanskrit that he could discuss on any topic with Brahmins in Sanskrit.

Roughly around 1660-62 Roth translated Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* into Latin.

He also translated a philosophical work- *Vedantsara* by Sadanand (late 15th century work) into Latin.

He also had made a copy of *Pancatattvaparakasha* of Venidutt, a metrical dictionary written in 1664.

In 1698, with his help, a Ramayana manuscript was presented to the Royal Society and deposited in Bodleian at Oxford.

In 1740 Father Jean Francois Pons sent a large collection of Sanskrit manuscripts , which included Vedic literature, philosophical and grammar text which he had collected from Chandranagar in India.

The most important French contribution to Indology was done by Abraham Anquetil Duperron, who visited India and after discussing with Parsi priest in Surat he published his first translation of Avesta in Latin in 1771.

He also translated Dara Shukoh's Persian version of Upanishads.

Duperron's translation of Upanishads influenced many European Scholars and compelled them to learn more about Hinduism and learn Sanskrit for it.

Duperron collected Sanskrit dictionaries on his Indian journey from 1755-61, in addition to his Zoroastrian manuscripts.

Duperron's contribution to Sanskrit is many a time not properly understood.

He had learned Sanskrit and developed a new method for its alphabets, which were independent of early alphabets introduced to Europe by H. Roth.

With the help of office of the Propaganda Fide, Duperron obtained incomplete Sanskrit vocabulary originating with missions from Cardinal Antonelli.

He also used other dictionaries and Sanskrit grammars available in Kings Library at Paris.

Duperron's one of the aims was to go to India and retrieve the complete Veda and read it with his own developed means , methods and different kinds of aids.

The complex Hindu philosophical doctrines and Sanskrit language were attracting serious attention of academic scholars and Church authorities.

It had posed the direct threat to superiority of Christian religion.

These two centuries were the period of scientific and industrial revolution in Europe, which had already challenged the basic doctrines of Christianity.

Eighteenth century Europe had the baggage of this paradigm shift in thinking, which continued in 18th century as a period of enlightenment.

This brought in more openness, liberal thinking, self-criticism and tolerance to other non-European civilizations.

France was the torchbearer of these movements and was far ahead of England.

Earlier Latin and later French and German were the languages of sciences and intellectual communication.

The political scene was changing on the European soil. Dutch, French colonies in India were surrendering to East India company.

However, East India company started emerging as a “Government” rather than only a trading company.

First they took control of Bengal, so obviously Bengal became the center of activity for Sanskrit and Indological studies.

We will see later how Sir William Jones’s establishment of Asiatic society of Bengal in 1784, opened the new venue for scholars to work on Sanskrit. This was the turning points in learning of Sanskrit and Indology by Western scholars.

This time line also marked the advent of many seminal works in Sanskrit and their translation in English.

They were further translated into French and other European languages.

Acquiring knowledge of Sanskrit and Hindu religion was going in the hands of administrators and policy makers of East India Company, which they wanted to use as a tool for governing India in future.

This position of Hinduism was obviously not acceptable not only to the mainstream Christianity but even the scientists of the period couldn't digest this view ([Priestley](#)).

All future Indology starting with William Jones till the beginning of 20th century should be assessed on this 18th century image of Hinduism portrayed by early European Indologists.

Nathaniel Brassey Halhed arrived in India in 1771 as a writer in East India Company's Bengal Service. He left India with Warren Hestings in 1785.

Halhed was a linguist with interest in development of languages. He had learned enough Persian.

He was the first European to see a connection between Bengali and Sanskrit. His knowledge of Sanskrit was probably limited. He wrote a *Gentoo code* in 1776.

Gentoo code was commissioned by Warren Hestings by appointing eleven Pandits for the job.

They were instructed to draw on the best authorities in Sanskrit. This group of Pandits produced a code in Sanskrit language , which was translated into Persian and from Persian it was rendered into English by Halhed.

The work of translation was completed by Halhed in 1775. The Code was published in England in 1776.

Halhed's preface to the Code in English is source of information about Hindus and their religion.

The code was translated in French and German languages in 1778.

Halhed also wrote a *Grammar of Bengal Language* in 1778.

In the preface of this book Halhed for the time pointed astonishing similarities of Sanskrit words with those of Persian, Arabic and even Latin and Greek.

Sir William Jones later developed this relationship into more scientific theory.

Though Halhed can not be called a Sanskrit scholar, his knowledge of Sanskrit was quiet sound. He left no stone unturned to gather credible information from original sources and thus collated large number of Sanskrit and even Persian manuscripts.

Wilkins came to Bengal at the age of twenty. He became a good friend of Halhed who persuaded him to take up Sanskrit in 1778.

He prepared Bengali fonts for Halhed's Bengali grammar. He was working on translation of *Mahabharat* at Benares.

In 1784 Hestings visited Benares and encouraged Wilkins to translate *Bhagwat Geeta* independently , which he did and published in 1785 in Britain.

Wilkins also published a translation of *Hitopdesha* in 1787, which was already known in Europe through Persian sources.

Wilkins left India in 1786. He became librarian to the Company and examiner at Company's college at Hailbury. Geeta was translated into French in 1787.

Sir William Jones the father of Indology arrived at Calcutta to become the Judge in 1783.

As mentioned in one of the slides, he started the famous Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784.

When he came to India he was already a Knight and had authored many books.

He was scholar of Persian. He was a true polymath. He had no knowledge of Sanskrit before coming to India.

He was educated at Harrow and Oxford. He had also written on Astronomy, Botany and Music.

He acquired good knowledge of Sanskrit in just two years time.

He took up the work by Halhed and came to a similar conclusion that there are great similarities between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek.

A Journal of Asiatic Society- '*Asiatick researches*' started publishing in 1788.

It became so popular that the pirated edition started appearing in London.

The early issues got translated into French and German. His seminal work, which were delivered as Anniversary Speeches , got published in *Asiatick researches*.

Jones' translation of *Shakuntala* got published first time in Calcutta in 1789 and *Manusmriti* in 1794.

He passed away in 1794 in India. What Jones could produce within ten years was far thought provoking and revolutionary than literature of preceding two hundred years on Hinduism.

These Scholars translated many Sanskrit texts into English which in tern got translated to other European languages.

These works later got translated into other European languages which created tremendous interest in Sanskrit learning and Hinduism for the European scholars.

Many European universities started Sanskrit chairs and study of Hinduism.

France was ahead of England. Alexander Hamilton started teaching Sanskrit at the Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes at Paris in 1803.

At famous Paris University first Sanskrit Chair was established at college de France in 1814.

During the same period Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852) delivered his famous lectures on Vedas.

In Germany Sanskrit Chair was established in 1816. In 1816 Franz Bopp forwarded the theory of common ancestry for Sanskrit, Greek and Latin.

This study gave birth to a new branch in Philology called comparative philology.

In England Sanskrit was first taught at the training college of East India Company at Hertford.

Later the first chair of Sanskrit was started at Oxford named after Boden. H. H. Wilson was the first Boden professor.

Gradually, the chairs of Sanskrit were created at London, Cambridge and Edinburgh.

Max Muller came to Oxford in the year 1846. He translated ***Rigveda*** ऋग्वेद [*ṛgveda*] into English and become the general editor of the 'Sacred Books of the East' published with the financial assistance from East India Company.

He delivered his famous lectures on 'The Science of Language' in Royal Institute in 1861 and 1863.

He was the first to use word 'Aryan' with racial connotation, for which he regretted later.

In Holland Sanskrit learning started late in 1865 at state University of Leiden.

The great Sanskrit scholar Hendrik Kern was appointed as first professor of Sanskrit at the University of Leiden.

In Denmark Sanskrit learning started very early by the members of Danish Colony in India.

Danes had factories at Trancobar in Tamilnadu (1620 to 1815), Shreerampur near Calcutta (1755 to 1855) and at Nicobar Islands.

Carsten Niebuhi and Rasmus Rask are other Danes who contributed to studies on Hinduism during 18th century.

Carl Theodor Johannsen (1804-1840) was the first to teach Sanskrit at the University of Copenhagen. He was appointed by a royal order on 23 Feb 1833.

Since then till today many Danes have contributed immensely to Indology.

Finland established Sanskrit learning in 1835 when Ivar Ulrik Wallenius (1793-1874) started Sanskrit teaching at the University of Helsinki.

Since then Finland also has contributed extensively to Sanskrit studies till today.

In Russia Sanskrit studies started though very rudimentary since the establishment of Academy of sciences at St.-Petersburg in 1725.

Theophilus Siegfried Bayer (1694-1738), a German working in this Academy surprisingly could get a Brahmin in St.-Petersburg to teach Sanskrit.

Sanskrit learning was more dependent on Individual scholars till 18th century in Russia.

However, since 19th century till today Russia also has a rich tradition of Indology and has contributed significantly in the development and studies in Sanskrit.

This small and sketchy write-up still demands an explanation as to what is so important about the Sanskrit language that evoke such an interest for all these researchers.

The basic point that one must mention in order to explain this phenomenon is the systematicity that the grammar of Sanskrit, Ashtadhyayi, has.

It has been mentioned at several places that the derivational processes that Ashtadhyayi possesses with regard to the ordering and re-ordering of the rules, have helped the computational linguistics to achieve, which otherwise could not have been possible.

I am not sure how much I will be able to present in this class to demonstrate this uniqueness of Ashtadhyayi, but I would try, at least, introducing the concepts and their importance when we talk about IGT in the next class.

However, I would like to submit that I hold no expertise in the area, and thus most of the discussion might be just introductory in nature.

Moreover, if you would be interested to pursue the discipline further, this introductory remark will certainly be useful and will help you in all possible ways.

That's all 😊

THE VEDIC SYSTEM OF THE SOUNDS OF LANGUAGE

K	C	Ṭ	T	P
Kh	Ch	Tḥ	Th	Ph
G	J	Ḍ	D	B
Gh	Jh	Dḥ	Dh	Bh
Ṇ	Ñ	Ṇ̣	N	M

velar palatal retroflex dental labial