

HISTORY OF EARLY SANSKRIT SCHOLARS

Scientific study of India/Hinduism and Sanskrit language started at the end of the eighteenth-century. Sir William Jones who is called as father of Indology started Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 with the help of his colleagues Charles Wilkins (1749-1836), Alexander Hamilton (1762-1824) and Colebrook () These Scholars translated many Sanskrit texts into English which in turn got translated to other European languages which created tremendous interest in Sanskrit learning and Hinduism. Many European universities started Sanskrit chairs and study of Hinduism.

1. 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.
2. 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 of his gave birth to a new branch in Philology called comparative philology. Many German scholars of repute emerged in 19th century that no other country in Europe could match.
3. In England Sanskrit was first taught at the training college of East India Company at Hertford and the first chair of Sanskrit was started much latter at Oxford named after Boden. H.H.Wilson was the first Boden professor. Later Chairs were created at London, Cambridge and Edinburgh.
4. In Holland Sanskrit learning started late in 1865 at state University of Leiden and great Sanskrit scholar Hendrik Kern was appointed as first professor of Sanskrit.
5. In Denmark Sanskrit learning started very early by member's of Danish Colony in India. Danes had factories at Trancobar in Tamilnadu (1620 to 1815), Serampore near Calcutta (1755 to 1855) and at Nicobar Islands after ousting Austrians in 1784 till 19th century. Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, a German, created first Tamil grammar in Latin in 1716 based on only 119 Tamil texts in his possession. He wrote profusely on Hinduism. Carsten Niebuhi and Rasmus Rask are other Danes who contributed to Hinduism studies 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 tremendously to Indology.
6. 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.

7. 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 depending on individual scholars till 18th century in Russia. However since 19th century till today Russia also has a rich tradition of Indology.

17th and 18th century in Europe was the period of Enlightenment. A critical, scientific and analytical approach in every walk of life was developing. Obviously this period was very conducive for Sanskrit learning. However, this development, especially in Sanskrit studies cannot be understood well unless and until we review the factors that contributed to Sanskrit learning during two preceding centuries.

EARLY SANSKRIT INTEREST IN EUROPE

India attracted western world since antiquity. However, since the invasion of Alexander we have information on India and Indian religion in Western literature, especially traveler's accounts. Our interest is restricted here to 15th century onwards up to 18th century.

Earlier authoritative writings on India from 15th to 18th century

Vasco de Gama opened the road to India in 1498.
Goa went into hands of Portuguese in 1510.

Portuguese authorities were very meticulous in noting their observations about the people of new colony. Observations noted by early officers, travelers and traders give a rich information about Hinduism.

Albuquerque, the first governor of Goa did inform the existence of Brahminic "Scientific" language- Sanskrit, which he found analogous to Latin.

Manoel d'Oliviera an Indian convert was probably the first to translate some portions of Jnaneshwari to Portuguese.

A British Jesuit Thomas Stephens (1549- 1619) arrived in Goa in 1579 and was one of the early European to master an Indian language. He wrote a grammar of Konkani language of Goa and many other books on Christianity.

Filippo Sassetti- another merchant and humanist was in India during 1583 to 1588 who also express detail opinion and uniqueness of Sanskrit and also about its age and linguistic affiliations. He died at Cochin at the age of 48. He probably is the first European to translate Ayurvedic text into Latin with the help of a Brahmin.

Another governor of Goa Joao de Barros (1496- 1570) made vast historical literature available with *Asia; or, Of the Deeds which the Portugues performed in the discovery and conquest of the seas and lands of the Orient*. The volumes were published from 1552 to 1615.

In 1600 East India Company was formed and
in 1602 Dutch East India company was established.

Jan Huygen van Linschoten, a Dutchman who became a Secretary of Archbishop of Goa, Dominican, Vincente da Fonseca. Linschoten returned back to Portugal in 1592. He wrote his traveling experiences-*Intenerario, voyage ofte schipvaert van Jan Huygen Van Linschoten naer Oost ofte Portugels Indien* 1579- 1592. This book has many interesting engravings.

Garcia de Orta was a court physician of a Portugues viceroy of Goa. He collected useful information on medicinal plants and publishe ddetailed account of it in a book *Coloquios dos simplosm, e drogas he cousas medicinais da India* published in 1563.

Henry Lord was a chaplain to the East India Company in Surat, India from 1624-1629. His interest in Parsi/Zorastrian culture culminated in writing an authoritative book, *A Discovery of Two Foreign Sects in the East Indies, The Sect of the Banians, the Ancient Natives of India* (1630) .Lord's work was used by **Jean Chardin** and **Thomas Hyde**, which inspired **Anquetil duperron** to visit Surat to study Zorastrian Religion and translation of their text Zend Avesta in 1771. He was not directly related to Sanskrit studies but was instrumental in starting Indological studies, at least 150 years earlier than William Jones.

Abraham Rogerius was a clergy in the service of Dutch East India company. He wrote a book titled *De open-deure tot het Verborgten Heydendom* with the help of two Brahmins **Padmanabha** and **Damarsa**, in the year 1651. This book provided rich information of Hindu religious beliefs and way of life. This also the first book, which gives a detail account of iconographical features of the Hindu temples including the main images found in them.

Padmanabha, informant of Rogerius offered a translation of Bhartruhari'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. Then he went to Agra and became a head of a Jesuit college. He learnt Sanskrit at Agra and acquired so much fluency in Sanskrit that he could discuss in Sanskrit with Brahmins in Agra. Around 1660 to 1662 Roth authored a translation of Paninian Sanskrit grammar 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 (Kosha) written in 1664.

Roth also contributed a chapter on the ten incarnations of Vishnu to Achanasius Kirchers famous book- *China-illustrata*.

The Sanskrit learning activity of early two centuries was gathering momentum in European countries. The complex Hindu philosophical doctrines and Sanskrit language was 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. Most of the early writings, traveler accounts and even lay observations were either written in French or later translate to French. The Indian philosophical, religious and scientific literature available those days on European continent did contribute to the process of enlightenment in Europe. So the beginning of the 18th century was dominated by French scholarship in Sanskrit learning and Indological studies. However political scene was changing on the European soil. Dutch, French colonies in India were surrendering to East India company and East India company was becoming 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. William Jones’s arrivals in 1783, establishment of Asiatic society of Bengal in 1784 were again, the turning points in learning of Sanskrit and Indology. This was a time when many seminal works in Sanskrit got translated into English, and then 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 used as a tool for governing India in future.

It would be worth tracing events in Sanskrit learning of 18th century.

In the beginning of the 18th century Europe was finding scarcity of authentic Sanskrit texts specially the Vedas. At the end of the 17th century Sanskrit manuscripts began to accumulate in European libraries although most of them remained un-deciphered.

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

Danish East India Company was established around 1620 when Danish King acquired Tranquebar and villages around to establish trade center. However, the mission activity started with arrival of German missionaries on behalf of Danish Mission in the year 1706. These missionaries studied extensively the Hindu Culture, local languages, architecture and medical knowledge etc. Most of their work is in Tamil. They carried large number of manuscripts with them to Halle. Recently a lot of attention has been paid to this interaction but a lot needs to be done yet.

In 1718 **Abbe Bignon** , librarian to King and reorganizer of the Academie des Inscriptions in Paris appealed to missionaries to seek out Indic manuscript for this library.

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 Chandranagore in India and according to one source they numbered 168.

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. 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 collected Sanskrit alphabets in India, 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 to go to India was also to retrieve the complete Veda and the means of reading it.

Paulinus of St.Bartholomew (Johann Philipp Wesdin) was an Austrian born Missionary of Carmelite order. In 1776 he was sent to Malabar, South India. He interacted extensively with local Brahmins and tried to learn Hindu religious practices and local and Sanskrit language. He authored the first printed Sanskrit Grammar in Europe, which was published in Rome in 1790 (*Sidharubam seu Samscrdamica* Grammar). After staying in India for 13 years he returned to Rome in 1789. He was a victim of National politics and was criticized heavily by contemporary British Indologist. Ludo Rocher has tried to correct this misunderstanding about his writings but his works need more attention.

The second half of the 18th century was dominated by British Indologists . They were John Zephaniah Holwell (1711- 1798), Alexander Dow (1735- 1779), Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, Charls Wilkins and last but not the least- Sir William Jones.

Holwell was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1711 and joined as a surgeon in East India Company in Bengal. For a very short period he was a Governor of Bengal and then soon he left India. He died in 1798 in England. He didn't know Sanskrit. He published his first book on Hinduism which had a very long title- *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan-----As also the Mythology and Cosmogony Fast and Festivals of Gentoos, followers of the Shastah, and a Dissertation on the Metempsychosis, commonly, thoughly erroneously, called Pythagorian Doctrine.*

In 1767, and 1771 he added second and third part to this book. In 1779 he re-issued second and third part with altered title- *A Review of the Original Principles, Religious and Moral, of the Ancient Bramins*. Lastly in 1786 he brought out a tract titled- *Dissertation on the Origin, Nature, and Pursuits of Intelligent beings and on Devine Providence, Religion and religious worship*. He followed orthodox Deism and was an enthusiastic advocate of vegetarianism. He was hostile to the Christian doctrine of Trinity and to the existing structure of Church of England. Hollwel didn't agree with contemporary missionaries who wanted to make Hinduism a derivative of Christianity. He also believed that Hindus believed in one god and Deities of the pantheon were to be taken only in the figurative sense. Hollwel was translated in German in 1767 and in French in 1768.

Alexander Dow born in Scotland in 1735. He was a Colnel in East India Companies Bengal army and died in India in 1779. In 1768 he translated 17th century historian Firishta's History on India into English titled- *History of Hindostan*. In 1772 he added third volume to this book. Dow didn't know Sanskrit. Dow's dissertation on Hindus appeared in French in 1769.

Both Hollwel and Dow were widely reviewed and discussed in Britain. Their description of Hinduism had very little new dimensions. What had been described in the early two centuries' writings of Missionaries and travelers on Hinduism had reflected in their writings. However, to a greater extent they accepted originality of Hindu philosophy, independent of Christianity.

Voltaire's criticism of Christian doctrine is well known. He was attracted to Hinduism in 1760 when he was presented a copy of '*Ezour Vedam*', a forgery perpetrated by the Society of Jesus. Voltair had read both Hollwel and Dow and also was influenced by their description of Hinduism. Voltair's *Philosophie de l'histoire* was first published in 1765, which had most abrasive anti-christian statements. There is no doubt that writings of Hollwel and Dow had influenced Voltair in formulating his views on antiquities of Religions. He challenged the antiquity of Jews and was convinced the Hindus were most ancient people on the earth.

This recognition to the Hinduism as an oldest religion on earth obviously put Judaism and Christianity as relatively recent religions in the history of mankind. Halhed's writings also tacitly supported Hindu antiquity and originality. 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 (Pristley). 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. Sir William Jones who started scientific Indology in 1784 though could not deny independent existence of Hindu civilization and philosophy had to perform a scholarly exercise at least to reduce the antiquity of Hindus and bring it in collaboration with the stories of genesis, Noah and stories of flood. This gave birth to common ancestry- Indo-European language ultimately culminating into Aryan race theory.

Nathaniel Brassey Halhed was a son of a Director of Bank of England and had received training at Harrow and Christchurch. He arrived in India in 1771 as a writer in East India Company's Bengal Service. He left India with Warren Hastings 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 was limited. He wrote a *Gentoo code* in 1776. Gentoo code was commissioned by Warren Hastings 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 complete by Halhed in 1775. The Code was published in England in 1776. The Code was a failure and could never gain the confidence of the people and thus was never accepted as final authority. 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. He developed these ideas further and in a manuscript written in 1779 he says

‘every part of speech, and every distinction , which is to be found in either Greek or Latin, and that in some particulars it is more copious than either..... I do not attempt to ascertain as a fact, either Greek or Latin are derived from this language; but I give a few reasons wherein such a conjecture might be founded: and I am sure that it is a better claim to the honour of a parent than, Phoenician or Hebrew’

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 sound. He left no stone unturned to gather credible information from original sources and thus collected large number of Sanskrit and even Persian manuscripts. His Sanskrit collection included twenty legal treatises with *Law of Manu* heading the list. He had collection of grammar as well as *Kavya* literature. A copy of *Mahabharat* in eight volumes was prepared for him at Benares. He also had a Persian version of *Bhagwat Puran* and he was to translate 10th book to English. He also referred to Dara Shukov's version of *Upanishads* in his preface to *Gentoo*. Most important is that his collection also had fragments of *Black Yajurveda*. His collection of manuscripts was purchased by British Museum in 1796.

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 Hastings 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. he started famous Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. When he came to India he was already knighted 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 with authority in Astronomy, Botany and Music. Within two years after coming to India he had acquired good knowledge of Sanskrit and within few months Jones came to the same conclusion , which Halhed had come to earlier about similarities between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek.

‘so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothick and Celtick, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit: and the old Persian might be added to the same family....’

A Journal of Asiatic Society- ‘*Asiatick researches*’ started publishing in 1788 and it became so popular that pirated editions started appearing in London. Te early issues got translated into French , German. His seminal works which were delivered as Anniversary Speeches got published through *Asiatick researches*. Jones’ translation of *Shakuntala* got published first time in Calcutta in 1789 and *Manusmriti* in 1794. He died at Calcutta in 1794. What Jones could produce within ten years was far thought provoking and revolutionary than literature of preceding two hundred years on Hinduism.

1. Dutch missionary Abraham Roger's *Open door to heathendom*, widely known through the French translation of 1670, *La Porte ouverte, pour parvenir a la connoissance du paganisme cache*,

2. Henry Lord's *A display of two forraigne sects in the East Indies*, 1630.

3. *Lettres edificantes et curieuses* a compilation of Jesuit observations in India during late 17th and early 18th century published during 1702 to 1777.

4. Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron translated *Avesta* for the first time with the help of a Parsi priest from Surat.

Anquetile also translated Daroshuko's Persian translation of Upanishad into Latin. He also carried with him Sanskrit alphabets.