

Vedic Studies: Texts, Language and Ritual

Research >
Vedic studies

The Vedas form one of the oldest elaborate corpuses of texts in an Indo-European language, connected to a ritual system still in use. In 2003, UNESCO declared the tradition of the Vedic chant, alive in present-day India, a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

IAS workshop and book launch
Vedic Ritual and Recent Archaeological Studies
in Central Asia
12 November 2004
Leiden

- Griffiths, A. and Houben, J.E.M. eds. 2004.
Vedic Studies: Texts, Language and Ritual: proceedings of the Third International Vedic Workshop. Groningen: Egbert Forsten

J.E.M. Houben

The modern study of the Vedas has a solid history in nineteenth-century scholarship, when it stimulated developing disciplines such as linguistics, comparative religious studies and cultural anthropology. The field of Vedic studies has known periods of exciting developments, consolidation and dustiness; today important developments inside and outside Vedic studies are opening the way to new achievements.

Technological advances

Computer technology and the use of electronic texts greatly reduce the time required for the extensive searches and comparisons that form the basis for linguistic and textual research. Nowadays most Vedic scholars use computerized data collections. Some contributions at the workshop in Leiden were specifically devoted to new computer applications.

The availability of high-quality filming technology enables the recording of rituals performed in India, which to date has been little done by 'classically' orientated Indologists. The performances usually structurally correspond to ancient sources (Smith 1987); this provides us with the opportunity to analyse rituals whose basic patterns go back to the pre-Rgvedic period.

New important Vedic manuscripts have been found which, while long known by name, were only available in imperfect form. This new manuscript material concerns the *Srautasuutra* of the *Vaadhhuulas*, the *Braahma.na* of the *Jaiminiya* branch of *Saamaveda*, and, last but not least, the *Paippalaada* recension of

the *Atharvan*, the fourth Veda, rich in unexplored textual, linguistic and ritual material. Improved editions of these texts are forthcoming.

The localization debate

A fourth development consists of advances in identifying when and where the people to whom we owe the Vedas lived. The contributions by Michael Witzel, Harry Falk and Wilhelm Rau in the proceedings of the First International Vedic Workshop (Witzel 1997) are a good introduction to the subject. The debate on the localization and the possible displacements of the Vedic people dates back to the early days of Indology and is of continuing interest to both scholars and a wider audience.

Developments from outside Indology have changed the terms of the debate: the work of modern geneticists may shed light on the waves of immigration into the Indian subcontinent. Geneticists suggest these started from the

philology is perhaps the only discipline in which the West and India are close to accepting overlapping basic principles

south, via the ocean, and later came from the north. Because the Vedas constitute such an old and elaborate corpus of texts, in a language that is 'Indo-European' but which has important remains of substratum or adstratum languages, the scientific relevance for investigation into the contacts between various waves of early African emigrants meeting on the Indian subcontinent can be expected to increase.

Recently another breakthrough occurred in a different area, which in time may have an impact on Indology and Vedic studies. In 2003, for the first time, India became a creditor to the International Monetary Fund. Indian economic growth will hopefully also bring new government policies to stimulate solid scholarship in the field of Vedic and other Indological studies.

Publications

There has been no lack of interest in Vedic studies over the last twenty years, nor lack of publications catering to that interest. In view of the divergent uses of the terms 'Vedas' and 'Vedic', it is useful to point out that certain connotations are not intended in *Texts, Language and Ritual*. While the term Veda literally means 'knowledge', here it primarily refers to a group of orally transmitted texts that became canonical in the first millennium B.C.E. on the Indian subcontinent. The 'knowledge' is concerned with an intricate ritual system that is regarded to have definite implications for man and the cosmos. These canonical texts became embedded in a tradition that regards them as having indisputable authority. Justification for this authority is usually derived from either, for logicians, the divine nature of the author(s), or, for Vedic exegetes, from the absence of any author, human or divine. Traditional texts directly dealing with the canonical core texts, for

strengths and limitations, are basic to the work of Bharati Krishna Tirtha, the philological method underlies the studies presented in *Texts, Language and Ritual*. Philology may be described as the art of 'listening' to a text; Witzel defined it as 'the study of a civilization based on its texts' (1997: v). Philology has a solid background in the Western tradition of textual scholarship, and also in a more dispersed way in India (Katre 1954; Colas 2001). It is perhaps the only discipline in which the West and India are close to accepting overlapping basic principles - an important topic for future comparative research.

The researchers in this book agree on the importance of the philological method, where possible supplemented by 'Vedic fieldwork' - the study of Vedic ritualists in South Asia who continue the ritual tradition into which they were born. In addition, the study of the linguistic and ritual aspects of the Vedas requires disciplinary approaches ranging from linguistics to the social sciences.

In a recent overview of research on the oldest of the four Vedas, the *Rgveda*, Oberlies (1998, 1999 and 2001) raised crucial issues in *Religionswissenschaft*. Oberlies' work has given rise to a long due discussion on the theories and methods underlying Vedic research. Even if the value of Oberlies' approach is undeniable, Vedic studies should be explored by different disciplines, which should cooperate without being conflated.

The combination of different disciplines (by scholars who are well-grounded in at least one of them) is an important tool in overcoming a limitation of the philological method. This limitation has led to criticism of its status as a scientific discipline: reliance on the personal judgement of a critical mind, though formed over a long process of training and research, makes subjectivism inevitable. This problem exists for anyone who tries to reconstruct a past reality on the basis of limited available textual or other remains. In the words of Cavalli-Sforza (2000: VIII): 'To some, history (including evolution) is not a science, because its results cannot be repli-

cated and thus cannot be tested by the experimental method. But studying the same phenomenon from many different angles, from many disciplines, each of which supplies independent facts, has the value of largely independent repetition. This makes the multidisciplinary approach indispensable'. <

References

- Bharatī K.r.s.na Tīrtha. 1965. *Vedic Mathematics or Sixteen simple Mathematical Formulae from the Vedas (For One-line Answers to All Mathematical Problems)*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Cavalli-Sforza, Luigi Luca. 2000. *Genes, Peoples and Languages*. (Translated by Mark Seielstad). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Colas, Gérard. 2001. 'Critique et transmission des textes dans la littérature sanskrite'. *Des Alexandries I: Du livre au texte* (sous la dir. de L. Giard et C. Jacob): 309-328. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
- Katre, S.M. 1954. *Introduction to Indian Textual Criticism*. Poona: Deccan College.
- Oberlies, Thomas. 1998. *Die Religion des Rgveda*. Erster Teil: *Das religiöse System des Rgveda*. Wien: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien.
- Oberlies, Thomas. 1999. *Die Religion des Rgveda*. Zweiter Teil: *Kompositionsanalyse der Soma-Hymnen des Rgveda*. Wien: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien.
- Oberlies, Thomas. 2001. 'Von Fach- und Sachgrenzen, von Exkursen und roten Fäden: Bemerkungen zur Religion des Rgveda.' *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sudasiens*, Band 45, 5-22.
- Smith, Frederick M. 1987. *The Vedic Sacrifice in Transition: A translation and Study of the Trikaa.n.dama.n.dana of Bhaaskara Mi;sra*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- Witzel, Michael, ed. 1997. *Inside the Texts - Beyond the Texts: New approaches to the study of the Vedas*. Cambridge, Mass.: Dept. of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University.

J.E.M. Houben is Directeur d'Etudes for 'Sources et Histoire de la Tradition Sanskrite' at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, la Sorbonne, Paris. He has published several books and articles on Vedic ritual and ancient Indian philosophy of grammar.
J.E.M._Houben@yahoo.com

Fellowships at the International Institute for Asian Studies

IIAS invites postdoctoral researchers to apply for fellowships in Leiden or Amsterdam.

The institute focuses on the interdisciplinary and comparative study of Asia in the humanities and social sciences, and their interaction with other sciences. IIAS research covers South, East, Southeast and Central Asia.

IIAS Fellows are offered office facilities, while the institute will mediate in gaining access to libraries, archives and other institutions in the Netherlands. Fellows may be asked to give a lecture or organise a workshop, remain in contact with European researchers, and make due reference to IIAS in (future) publications, (partly) made possible through research done during your stay.

IIAS has five categories of fellowships for researchers:

- Affiliated fellows
- Research fellows (upon vacancy only)
- Senior fellows
- IIAS professors (upon vacancy only)
- Artists in residence

IIAS fellowship applications can be submitted at any time. Vacancies are announced in the IIAS Newsletter and on the website.

For more information and an IIAS fellowship application form see the IIAS website at: www.iias.nl
For specific information, please contact Lena Scheen or Wouter Feldberg at: iiasfellowships@let.leidenuniv.nl