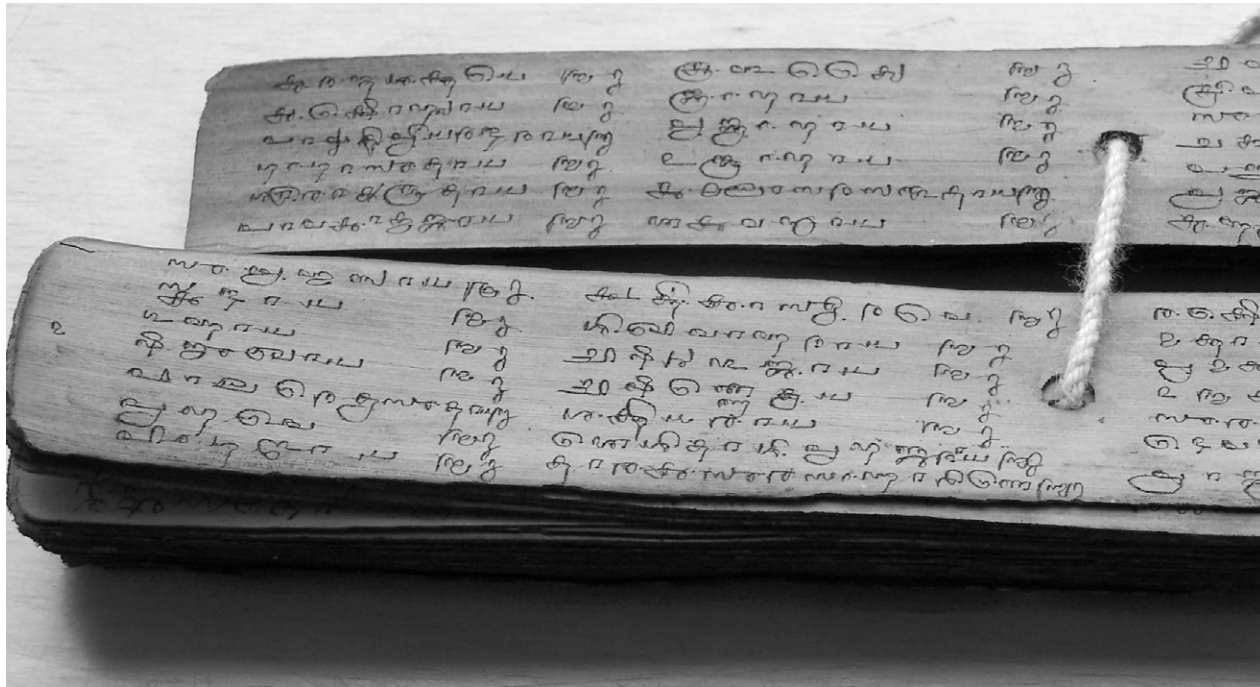


Dravidian studies in the Netherlands part 2 (1860s-1970s): Classical India rediscovered



Subrahmanyanwaminamavali, Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscript in Grantha script

Research >
Dravidian studies

Dutch curiosity about South India triggered by overseas trade expeditions faded by the end of the seventeenth century, resulting in a gap in Dravidian studies that lasted for 170 years. Meanwhile, elsewhere in Europe, research on Indian antiquity was evolving. As H.W. Bodewitz recently argued: in Britain, the winner of colonialist competition in India, Indomania gave way to either Indophobia or disinterest. In France, the defeated colonizer, initial enthusiasm waned but research, spurred by national ambition, went on. In Germany, an outsider to colonial competition in India, zealous scholars turned from romantic fascination to a more scientific approach. In the Netherlands, 'there was absolutely nothing'. (2002:11)

Luba Zubkova

A standstill and a new start

As the Dutch lost their economic stronghold in India to the British, they also lost interest in South Indian studies. The Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century was in decline, and society was dominated by *rentiers* who profited by dividends from colonial company shares, 'living off the legacy of the past.' (Israel 1995:1017) Voltaire caught a glimpse of the fading glory of Dutch universities in 1737 and marvelled at their ability to attract foreign students with new ideas and methods, especially in science and medicine. Yet economic decay, general despondency and a preoccupation with national decline turned Dutch scholars and publicists away from many of the broader issues debated elsewhere, such as in France. The physico-theological approach of the early eighteenth century - combining empirical science with veneration for an omnipresent God - remained dominant in Dutch universities, while the quality of intellectual life left much to be desired.

Conservatism during this time also extended to Oriental studies, which were traditionally associated with university theology departments and did not go beyond the established field of Semitic languages. After the fall of the Republic (1808) and the consolidation of the Constitutional Monarchy, the Netherlands still lagged behind other leading European nations. Only in the mid-nineteenth century, when urban liberal burghers gained the upper hand, did the economy and culture begin to rapidly recover: a revised colonial policy in the spirit of imperialist European expansion stimulated Orientalism.

Sanskrit was the first language deemed worthy of a chair, and one was estab-

lished in 1865 at Leiden University. Hedrik Kern (1833-1917), an expert in Indo-European philology and Buddhism, was appointed the first professor of Sanskrit upon his return from the Dutch East Indies. Yet it was not until 1876 that Pieter de Jong, a farmer's son who became a professor of Arabic history, announced the official separation of Oriental studies from theology at Utrecht University. Dravidian studies, however, had to wait another century for recognition in university curricula and research.

Johan van Manen (1877-1943)

Self-taught Orientalist Johan van Manen (1877-1943) took on the responsibility of introducing ancient Indian ('Aryan') wisdom to the Dutch public (see Richardus 1989). At the age of eighteen he was carried away by the teachings of H.P.

van Manen was especially interested in Himalayan tradition and aspired to unveil the essential uniformity of sacred eastern philosophy at its two poles: Aryan (north) and Dravidian (south)

Blavatsky, founder of the theosophical movement (since 1875) following Buddhist and Brahmanic theories of pantheistic evolution and reincarnation. Believing that this movement could instigate Western respect for Asian peoples as well as enhance their self-esteem, he took to spreading theosophy in Europe and in the Dutch East Indies. In 1909 van Manen set off for Madras to work at the Theosophical Society (TS) headquarters in Adyar.

Since the first Dutch contact with TS founders in Java around 1880, theosophy was an important issue for colonial intellectuals. It provided an impetus for research in Asian philosophical sys-

tems, contributing to a revival of Buddhism and Hinduism. Back in the Netherlands, Orientalists such as J.W. Boissevain also became interested in the new intellectual trend. Some even began to associate it with the Western approach to Aryan wisdom. Kern's successor in Leiden, Indian antiquity specialist J.S. Speyer, referred to the subject of Indian philosophy mainly as 'theosophy'.

While in Adyar, van Manen studied Indian wisdom with a Tamil guru and witnessed the discovery and initial education of the future philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, who happened to be his teacher's son. Van Manen was especially interested in Himalayan tradition and aspired to unveil the essential uniformity of sacred eastern philosophy at its two poles: Aryan (north) and Dravidian (south). Unhappy with the TS Presi-

dent's involvement in Indian politics, he left Tamilnadu in 1916 and settled in Darjeeling. He thereafter reviewed and translated various Orientalist materials and lectured extensively, including at the Indological Kern Institute, founded in 1925 in Leiden.

For many years van Manen spent his private, modest means collecting important works of South Indian art and archaeology. Thanks to him some 350 Tibetan Buddhist scroll-paintings and Himalayan artefacts are stored at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. The Kern Institute holds over 300 palm-leaf manuscripts (*ola* in Tamil) he collected between 1928 and 1931, as well

as a unique collection of 1,580 Tibetan manuscripts and block prints.

Aryan Letters at universities

In 1921, Aryan Letters, alias Indian philology, was introduced at Leiden University. Its aim was the study of Sanskrit and 'related subjects', including Indian archaeology, and the study of the Indian cultural impact on Indonesia - the country where pragmatic interest of the Netherlands lay. Curiously, the very term 'Indology' until the 1950s meant research relating to Dutch colonial possessions in Indonesia. Despite their late rediscovery of Indian cultural heritage, the Dutch distinguished themselves during the twentieth century as Europe's top researchers in the field. Among them was F.B.J. Kuiper, appointed at Leiden University in 1939, who studied the influence of non-Aryan (Dravidian) languages of ancient India on Sanskrit and attempted to identify the meaning of myths and other aspects of the Vedic religion. Kuiper's later research on innovations in spoken Tamil was taken up in the 1950s by K. de Vreese of Amsterdam University. After specializing in Sanskrit philology, De Vreese was given a new course to launch: modern Indian languages - the first time the term 'modern' was used in reference to Orientalism.

Zvelebil's Dravidology

As education and research grew in importance in the post-war period, universities received increasingly large government subsidies which they could use at their own discretion. By the mid-1960s the Dutch economy was in recovery and flourishing, and many former colonial intellectuals who had to leave Indonesia ended up at university departments of Oriental studies. The attraction of the generation's youth to the spiritual culture and art of modern India stimulated this scholarly interest, another incentive being decolonisation in Asia and the need to build international relations on a new foundation. The Dravidian south of India received much attention at that time (in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, for instance) and at Utrecht University a special Institute of Eastern Languages was founded in 1955, creating a basis for promoting Indological disciplines other than Sanskrit and Vedic studies.

In the early 1970s, the head of that institute, J. Gonda, invited exiled Czech scholar K.V. Zvelebil, who had lectured for some time in Chicago, to Utrecht. A brilliant researcher, Kamil Zvelebil was a Dravidianist by definition. In Utrecht he was active in linguistics, philology, comparative religion, cultural anthropology and literary history, introducing not only innovative subjects but methods as well. Zvelebil began with a reconstruction of a historical grammar of Tamil and became involved in phonological and morphological problems of comparative Dravidology. He organized a project on the hitherto unexplored languages of Nilgiri - the remote Blue mountain region in Tamilnadu where local tribes (the Irulas) managed to pre-

serve their linguistic and cultural identity. In addition to comparative linguistics, Zvelebil explored the disappearing skills, cultural and religious practices of the Dravidian people, as well as Tamil myths and legends (see 'Een bescheiden onderkomen' 1981:131-134).

On one occasion Zvelebil wrote that while there was no ground for setting apart Dravidian literature - Dravidian here meaning that which originated and flourished in the south of India - from other literatures of India, Tamil literature was an entirely different matter: 'There, and only there, are we able to point out a whole complex set of features (...) separating this Dravidian literature not only from other Indian literatures but from other Dravidian literatures as well.' (Zvelebil 1973:1) This thesis represents a turning point in the scholar's career (to be discussed later), when he plunged into the two millennia-old literary tradition of the Tamils, striving to reveal its richness and beauty to a Western audience.

It was due to his copious work that Dravidian studies in the Netherlands finally began to take shape, reaching its zenith in the following two decades. A prolific author, Zvelebil produced a large part of his nearly 490 publications at Utrecht University. On his retirement in 1990 he mentioned that his goal - to make the study of Dravidian languages and cultures part and parcel of Indological research - had been achieved. He said: 'When I coined the term "Dravidology", proposing to establish a legitimate field of study on a par with the field of Indology, my attempt met with incredulous reactions varying from ridicule to hostility. (...) I am happy to say that nowadays it has become fully acceptable to speak of Dravidianists and Dravidology'. (Zvelebil 1991:1) <

References

- Bodewitz, H.W. 2002. De late 'ontdekking' van het Sanskrit en de Oudindische cultuur in Europa (afscheidsrede, 01.11.02). Leiden: Universiteit Leiden.
- 'Een bescheiden onderkomen'. 1981. Historisch overzicht van de studie van de Oosterse talen en culturen aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht. Utrecht: Utrecht University.
- Israel, Jonathan I. 1995. *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Richardus, Peter. 1989. *The Dutch Orientalist Johan van Manen*. Leiden: Kern Institute.
- Zvelebil, Kamil V. 1973. *The Smile of Murgan: on Tamil literature of South India*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Zvelebil, Kamil V. 1991. *Long-range linguistic comparisons: the case of Dravidian*. Valedictory lecture delivered on 5 September 1990. Utrecht: Utrecht University.

Luba Zubkova (Bytchikhina) worked as a researcher of modern Tamil literature in the academic Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow. At present she is a freelance researcher and teaches at the Utrecht Institute of Translators (ITV). zoebkova@hotmail.com