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## Sanskrit's affiliation to European languages and competing models of 'Similarity': Sir William Jones, Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux, and Friedrich Schlegel

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### Abstract

In 1784, Sir William Jones noted the similarities between Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek, leading to his recognition for discovering the concept of 'Indo-European' over two hundred years ago. However, new researches credit Father Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux, a French Jesuit missionary in India, as the precursor to Sir William Jones with regard to discerning the similarity between Sanskrit and European languages. However, models of 'similarity' proposed by both of them allow for notable divergences. The concept of 'mosaic ethnology' sheds much light on their respective ideas of 'similarity'. Sir William Jones aimed to emphasize the ethnological analogy between Indians and Europeans, based on their common descent from Hamite lineage. Father Coeurdoux, however, analyzed the linguistic-ethnological similarity between Indians and Europeans by highlighting their common Japhetite lineage. He argued that the Brahmins of India, who spoke Sanskrit, had closely interacted with Greek, Latin and other European peoples, and that this interaction became the source of language 'similarity' evolving over time. In Germany, in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Schlegel made inquiries into Sanskrit language and texts, and referred to linguistic similarity between Sanskrit and European languages as deriving from flectional character of Sanskrit. This finding earned him the reputation of being one of the earliest pioneers of comparative linguistics. Yet, Schlegel's apparent linguistic enterprise contained an undertone of 'internal colonialism', denoting Germany's aspiration to re-define itself in terms of leading a spiritual revitalization of Europe which stood on the brink of disintegration. More than that, in Schlegel's ensuing scheme of retrieving and refining the lost primeval wisdom of India, contours of difference as well as that of interspersal between the West and East seem to be curiously interlocked.

**Keywords:** Mosaic ethnology, Similarity, Colonialism, German Romanticism and Sanskrit, Primeval Wisdom of India, Friedrich Schlegel and Europe's spiritual rejuvenation

### Introduction

Before Renaissance ended in Europe, a number of missionaries travelled to India and attempted to delve into various facets of Indian culture. Noticeably enough, they were attracted to the study of Sanskrit, the linguistic locus of India. The writings of these missionaries also brought Sanskrit to the attention of Western scholarship. Iwona Milewska (2003) <sup>[11]</sup> stresses this fact saying, "The first descriptions of Sanskrit came from the Jesuit missionaries who reached India...at the turn of sixteenth and the seventeenth century. The person who noticed the similarities between Indian and European languages was the English Jesuit, Thomas Stephens (1549-1619). He came to Goa in 1579. In a letter to his brother, written on 24 October, 1583 in Latin, he observed: "There are many languages used in these countries. Their speech is not without charm; in composition it resembles Latin and Greek; phrases and constructions are worthy of respect" (p. 63).

For having noted the similarities between Indian languages, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, this English Jesuit missionary can be safely accorded the status of being a precursor to the French Jesuit missionary Father Gaston Laurent Coeurdoux and to the British Orientalist Sir William Jones from 18<sup>th</sup> century. In his presidential address on 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1938 at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Professor L. F. Maingard had sketchily referred to the discovery of the affinity of Sanskrit with classical European languages through the efforts of Father Coeurdoux and Sir William Jones. Professor L. F. Maingard (1938) <sup>[9]</sup> suggested, the "contacts of the Europeans with India led to the "discovery" of Sanskrit, which gave the

necessary stimulus to a new point of view in the study of languages. The French Jesuit, Coeurdoux (1767) and Sir William Jones (1786) drew attention to its affinities with the two ancient classical languages of Europe” (p. 5). In his lecture, Professor Maingard further delved into the question as to how this discovery of Sanskrit and its affinity with two classical languages of Europe came about at the hands of Father Coeurdoux and Sir William Jones. Professor Maingard had contemplated that the meticulousness of the sound-system and grammatical-structure maintained in its rigorous originality over centuries made Sanskrit language into an object of interest for the European scholars, who ventured further to address to the notion of the affinity of Sanskrit with Greek and Latin. During the course of his lecture, Professor Maingard (1938) <sup>[9]</sup> elaborated that Sanskrit “in its earliest form Vedic-dates back probably to over 3,000 years ago. It had been preserved for centuries as the religious language of India, and, on account of its sacred character, every effort had been made by the native Indian scholars to keep its old writings and their pronunciation in the original form in which they had been handed down to the Brahmins. To achieve this purpose, the Indian grammarians took a very great deal of trouble in ensuring the accurate description of its sound-system and its grammatical structure. This minute analytical work clearly showed to European linguists, who subsequently became acquainted with it, the points of interest of Sanskrit as compared with Latin and Greek” (p. 5).

Subsequently, towards the last quarter of the eighteenth century, under the tutelage of Sir William Jones, the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded in Calcutta, which became the pivotal center of research on Sanskrit and India. In the history of Linguistics, one invariably comes across the famous passage from the “Third anniversary discourse” delivered by Sir William Jones in Calcutta in 1784 as the president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> alludes to a much-cited passage, in which Sir William Jones made a scholarly declaration of the similarity between Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek, proposing that “*Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; 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;...” (p. 14).

Over last more than two centuries, the occasion of this declaration of the similarity between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin by Sir William Jones in Calcutta has been acknowledged as the earliest announcement of the idea of Indo-European. Sir William Jones proposes Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin to be co-descendants from a common source, which is lost to humanity now. The nature of co-descent appears to be linguistic at first sight. The linguistic nature of this co-descent has been called into question in recent past and the notion of ‘similarity’ has been diversely tackled. Scholars are insisting that Sir William Jones was equally passionate about the question of the affinity of peoples. Apart from language, the idea of common ethnological source of the peoples constantly stimulated his researches. The ethnological concern of Sir William Jones has been emphasized by Lyle Campbell, when he cites Sir William

Jones arguing in one of his discourses articulating the purpose of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, “five principal nations who have in different ages divided among themselves, as a kind of inheritance, the vast continent of Asia, with the many islands depending on it, are the Indians, the Chinese, the Tartars, the Arabs, and the Persians: who they severally were, whence and when they came, where they now are settled, and what advantage a more perfect knowledge of them all may bring to our European world, will be shown, I trust, in five distinct essays; the last of which will demonstrate the connexion or diversity between them, and solve the great problem, whether they had any common origin, and whether that origin was the same which we generally ascribe to them” (p. 247). A shift of emphasis is evident here, for Sir William Jones earlier referred to a common linguistic source of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and now, he was postulating a common origin of the Indians, the Chinese, the Tartars, the Arabs, and the Persians. At the same time, he was equally concerned about the advantage, which this ethnological commonness of the peoples could bring to the Europeans.

It is at this juncture that the question of British dominance over India requires to be addressed. For long, the systematic study of Indian languages was considered to be guided principally by the colonial-administrative motives of the British East India Company. Franson Manjali (2020) dwells on this colonial-administrative dimension by citing Bernard Cohn, who had insisted that the “years 1770 to 1785 may be looked upon as the formative period during which the British successfully began the program of appropriating Indian languages to serve a crucial component in their construction of the system of rule. More and more British officials were learning the ‘classical’ languages of India (Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic)...More importantly, this was the period in which the British were beginning to produce an apparatus: grammars, dictionaries, treatises, class books, and translations about and from languages of India...The subjects of these texts were first and foremost the Indian languages themselves, represented in European terms as grammars, dictionaries, and teaching aids in a project to make the acquisition of a working knowledge of the language available to those British who were to be part of the ruling group in India” (p. 155). However, this elaboration fails to account for the demanding diligence, with which Sir William Jones was focused to link the common origin of the peoples of Asia with the advantage of Europe.

Recent researches are emphatic about contending that besides the colonial-administrative narrative, there existed another narrative during British rule over India, namely the narrative of rule according to Providence. Sir William Jones believed that European peoples and the peoples in the rest of the world were connected by a Biblical plan. This pattern of connection can be elucidated through the term “Mosaic ethnology”. Explaining “Mosaic ethnology”, Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> notes that the “Mosaic ethnology is a simple locational technology for determining the relations among peoples, conceived as branching lineages of the human family tree, as relations of near and far. It is quite capable of worldwide extension and has been the basis of ethnological classifications for a very long period of history...in the Mosaic ethnology every human being is related to every other, but in varying degrees of nearness” (p. 11).

Tracing Mosaic ethnology to the Book of Genesis of the Bible, Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> elucidates that in “Genesis, the ten patriarchs from Adam to Noah are succeeded by a branching tree of Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham, and Japhet, followed by their sons, and so forth, comprising a large family tree of patriarchs whose progeny are the nations of the earth. The names of the patriarchs are the names of the nations. Thus, for example, the patriarch Eber is the father of the Hebrew people, and the patriarch Javan gives his name to the Greeks, that is, the Ionians” (p. 10). Thus, Mosaic ethnology has permeated human history as a Biblical plan in the form of the “Tree of Nations”. Thomas R. Trautmann has argued recently that Sir William Jones made use of Mosaic ethnology to hypothesize the common ethnological origin of the peoples across India and Europe. Underlining the ethnological dimensions lying behind the linguistic researches of Sir William Jones, Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> contends that the “main thing to grasp about the “Anniversary discourses” is that they were an *ethnological* and *historical* study, not a linguistic one as such; thus the language data function in the argument as evidence for propositions about historical relations among nations or races” (p. 15). Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> is unequivocal about proposing that “Jones treats languages as a means, and just one of many means, to disentangle ethnological relationships” (p. 15). The ethnological intimacies between Europe and India, which Jones was seeking long to substantiate, was explicitly articulated by Sir William Jones in the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary lecture in 1793. Franson Manjali (2020) calls into attention that Sir William Jones endorsed the ethnological affiliation between Europe and the antiquity of India by invoking Mosaic ethnology, when he affirmed, “all our historical researches have confirmed the *Mosaic* accounts of the primitive world; and our testimony on that subject ought to have the greater weight” (p. 163).

Being convinced of the mosaic affiliations between India and Europe, and having pursued his ethnological-historical researches in this direction, Sir William Jones arrived at the conclusion that the peoples of the world could be viewed in three lineages, namely Shemites, Hamites, and Japhetites, each guided respectively by the inclination religion, arts and sciences; civilization, and nomadism. It is significant to note that Sir Jones sought to establish the ethnological analogy between Indians and Europeans in terms of their descent from Hamite lineage. Even as Jones identifies the ethnological Hamite descent as a source of connection between the Indians and the Europeans, this Mosaic ethnological finding served to strengthen the narrative of Providence in the colonial interest in a very subtle way. In the lecture of Sir William Jones, the intermingling of the narrative of Providence with the colonial ambitions comes to the fore. For example, Franson Manjali (2020) cites Sir William Jones setting forth the goal of British rule, highlighting the design of Providence, and yet remained explicit about colonial purposes while talking of “Indian territories, which Providence has thrown into the arms of Britain for their protection and welfare, the religion, manners, and laws of the natives preclude even the idea of political freedom; but their histories may possibly suggest hints for their prosperity, while our country derives essential benefit from the diligence of a placid and submissive people, who multiply with such increase, even after the ravages of famine” (p. 164).

Unmistakably, the designation of the native Indians as ‘submissive’ and simultaneous reference to the ‘benefit from the diligence’ of the peoples of India resonate with a vocabulary characteristic of colonial discourse of the British dominance over India. Thus, the Mosaic ethnological research of Sir William Jones and his inquiries into a common source of peoples were deeply entangled with colonial conceptions of rule over India.

It is at this point, that a discussion of the French Jesuit Missionary Gaston Laurent Coeurdoux seems admittedly pertinent. It is instructive to take note of the following remarks of Thomas R. Trautmann on Sir William Jones before proceeding to deal with Gaston Laurent Coeurdoux. Observing an eccentric facet in the ethnological connections postulated by Sir William Jones, Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> says that this “structure of associations was taken over from Jacob Bryant’s *Analysis of antient mythology* (1744-46...) It is somewhat eccentric, in that it identifies the Indians, and hence Persians and Europeans, as Hamites, in place of the more usual view that Europeans descended from Japhet” (p.16). The works of Gaston Laurent Coeurdoux redress this pinpointed error-laden eccentricity. Introducing Father Coeurdoux vis-à-vis Sir William Jones in the perspective of Indo-European, Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> writes that perhaps “the most telling case that helps us free ourselves from the naturalizing narrative of the discovery of Indo-European by the mere inspection of Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek is that of the Jesuit missionary Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux, who spent his whole adult life in South India” (p. 18). Father Coeurdoux had already outlined the idea of the Indo-European much before Sir William Jones, even as his discovery of Indo-European was eclipsed by Sir William Jones. Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> expands on it, mentioning, “Father Coeurdoux also conceived a form of the Indo-European idea, and he did so before Jones, in a letter to the Académie des Inscriptions written in 1768. However, his ideas were only published in 1808-after his death and after Jones had published the “Third anniversary discourse”-thanks to the efforts of another French Indologist, Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron” (p.19). Father Coeurdoux shared a common ground with Sir William Jones in making use of Mosaic ethnology for establishing similarity between Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. Yet, he differed from Sir William Jones in affirming that the Europeans and Indians were the descendants of Japhet, and not that of Ham. He emphasized that the Brahmins of India, who spoke Sanskrit, were the descendants of Japhet, and these Brahmins of India had closely interacted with Greek, Latin and other European peoples. In the course of the interaction of Indian Brahmins with the European peoples in ancient times, through mutual borrowing, the similarities flourished in Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> explains that after “providing a number of examples of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit words, Coeurdoux interprets the similarities among them in this way: The Samskroutam language is that of the ancient Brahmes; they came to India from the north of that country, from Caucasia, from Tartary, which had been peopled by the descendants of Magog. Of the sons of Japhet, some spoke Greek, others Latin, still others Samskroutam. Before their total separation, their languages were somewhat mixed because of the communication they had among each other; and there remain vestiges of that ancient intercourse, in the common words which still exist, and of which I have

reported a part” (p.19). The difference between Sir William Jones and Father Coeurdoux is obvious. Sir William Jones treated Indians and Europeans to be the descendants of Ham, and more than that conceived of a fixed common linguistic source of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, that was lost. Father Coeurdoux, on the other hand, conceived of Indians and Europeans to be the descendants of Japhet, partaking in nomadic tendency. Father Coeurdoux argued that even as the Greek, Latin, and Brahmins could be conceptualized in the descendance lineage of Japhet, they were linguistically different, and similarities appeared through communication among peoples who spoke different languages. This difference of position between Sir William Jones and Father Coeurdoux has been vividly explained by Trautmann, which illuminates two competing models of similarity existing in Indological discourse in 18<sup>th</sup> century colonial India.

Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> clearly explains the competing models of similarity between Sir William Jones and Father Coeurdoux arguing that while “Coeurdoux, like Jones, interprets the similarity among the three languages in biblical terms, that is, in the terms of the Mosaic ethnology, we see in this passage that this particular technology of location does not operate as an iron frame leading always to identical results. For Jones, the three nations of this passage are Hamites, but for Coeurdoux they are Japhetites; moreover, for Coeurdoux the Brahmins of India are of the descendants of Japhet called Magog, who had migrated to Central Asia, whence the Brahmins migrated to India. He accounts for the similarity of the three languages not by co-descent from a single ancestor language, as in Jones, but by mutual borrowing among languages long neighboring one another, though originally distinct” (p.19). The model of similarity of the languages, as conceived by Father Coeurdoux, can also be interpreted as an undertaking to overcome the ‘confusion’ through ‘communication’. That is the reason, why Trautmann ropes in the example of the ‘Tower of Babel’ to explain the idea of similarity as proposed by Father Coeurdoux. Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> underlines that one could suppose “the author means that God made these languages completely different from one another following the building of the Tower of Babel, and thereafter they grew similar because of their communication with one another” (p.19).

Two different positions about the idea of similarity in Sir William Jones and Father Coeurdoux also allow enough space to reflect on the nature and function of ‘similarity’. In Sir William Jones, the vector of similarity moves from unity towards difference, whereas in Father Coeurdoux this vector moves from difference towards unity. Thomas R. Trautmann (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> expounds this fundamental polarity between Sir William Jones and Father Coeurdoux arguing that from the cited “passage we can draw several conclusions. First, both Father Coeurdoux and Sir William Jones, independently of one another, observed similarities among Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek through comparison, and sought for interpretations from the Genesis narrative of the Confusion of Tongues and the Dispersal of Nations <sup>[1]</sup>, in short, from the Mosaic ethnology. Second, they located the nations speaking these languages differently, Coeurdoux

making them co-descendants of Japhet, Jones making them co-descendants of Ham. The way in which the Mosaic ethnology is applied is thus undetermined, and the outcomes of its applications are not predictable, though both Coeurdoux and Jones place the three nations in a common descent line. Third, we come to the crucial move: from the genealogy of nations to the genealogy of languages. Here Coeurdoux and Jones again differ, showing two very different totalizing conceptions. Coeurdoux gives us an explanation of language similarity through mixture, positing a movement from original distinctness toward similarity. Jones gives us an explanation of language similarity through co-descent, positing a movement from original unity to difference...” (pp. 19-20).

Apart from Sir William Jones and Father Coeurdoux, a prominent German romantic writer and thinker Friedrich Schlegel also raised ‘similarity’ between Sanskrit and European languages to an enviable status of curious attention. Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the poets, thinkers, and writers of Germany were overwhelmingly captivated by India, when first translations of Sanskrit texts caught their attention. Sir William Jones seminally contributed to this intensification of the German literary-intellectual reception of India. Sir William Jones’s rendering of *Shakuntala* from Sanskrit into English, which had been translated in turn into German by Johann Georg Forster, kindled a passionate yearning for ancient Indian literature and wisdom in Germany. Kalidasa’s drama *Shakuntala* got as far as to Johann Friedrich Herder through Johann Georg Forster. Ronald Taylor (2003) <sup>[12]</sup> underscores that in 1789 “the remarkable Sir William Jones-jurist, Oriental scholar and founder of the Bengal Asiatic Society-published an English translation of *Shakuntala*, a play by the fourth-century Indian dramatist Kalidasa. The work caught the imagination of European writers, among them the author and traveller Johann Georg Forster, who at once set to work on a German version of Jones’s translation, adding his own commentary on the philosophy and mythology which underlies the drama. Forster’s work appeared in 1791, and in May of that year he sent a copy to Johann Friedrich Herder” (p. 130).

Herder was one among the pioneering thinkers in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany to have noted the discrete cultural achievement of India and the Orient. To him, the East denoted not only the cultural sphere where the language in its original form sprang, rather he also identified in the East the cradle of human race, emotions, and religion. Ronald Taylor’s observation in this regard is illuminating, when he (2003) <sup>[12]</sup> underlines that Herder “...had pointed to the East as the original source of language and claimed oriental alphabets as the prototypes of those in the West; in his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* of 1774 his zeal had led him to an even more embracing expression of his convictions: ‘Behold the East-the cradle of the human race, of human emotions, of all religion!’” (p. 130). Aided by Georg Forster, he was acquainted with ancient Sanskrit texts in translation like *Hitopdesa* and *Bhagavadgita*. Consequent on this, Herder’s commendation for India deepened and he became beholden to India as a holy land. Finally, when Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* fell into his hands, he lavished his enthusiastic praise on India. Referring to Herder’s reverence for India, Ronald Taylor (2003) <sup>[12]</sup> notes that later “Georg Forster drew his attention to Charles Wilkin’s translations of the Hindu

<sup>1</sup> The confusion of tongues is a biblical event that occurred at Babel and is the cause of the early separation of mankind and their division into nations. The descendants of Noah built a tower to prevent their dispersion, but God “confounded their language” and they were scattered over the whole earth.

*Bhagavadgita* (1785) and *Hitopdesa* (1787); and now, a few years later, came the full vindication of his faith—an authentic work of Sanskrit literature accessible in his mother tongue, a work which revealed with unmistakable immediacy those noble human qualities which he had proclaimed as expressive of Indian civilization:

Where Shakuntala dwelt with her once lost scion, Where Dushyanta welcomed her back from the realm of the Gods—O Holy Land, I salute thee, thou Source of all Music, Thou Voice of the Heart—O raise me aloft to thy spheres!” (p. 130-31).

To a large extent, Herder’s erudite admiration of India, its language, literature, and culture exerted profound influence on the German romantic turn to India. Seeking to highlight this occurrence Ronald contends that it was precisely “this temper of reverence, this commitment to an idealization, which set the tone for the German Romantics’ view of the East—and when they talked of the East, their thoughts were almost invariably of India. Here was a world of new treasures, a world not buried in the past but accessible and, above all, relevant, to the present” (p. 131). Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> endorses this perspective saying a “wave of enthusiasm and fervent hope swept through the rising generations in the [German] universities. It was felt that brilliant new possibilities heralding the beginning of a great cultural renewal, a rebirth of both spiritual life and poetry, had suddenly become available” (p. 204). Around this time, Friedrich Schlegel cultivated his interest for Sanskrit, when on the one hand he read Georg Forster’s translation of *Shakuntala*, and on the other hand came in intimate contact with the luminary scholars of Sanskrit in Germany and France. An access to the commentary of Herder in the *Shakuntala* translation by Georg Forster touched off his curiosity in literary treasure of Sanskrit literature. Robert Cowan (2010) <sup>[2-3]</sup> alludes to early leanings of Friedrich Schlegel towards Sanskrit literature, mentioning that “Schlegel’s interest in India had several roots. First, in 1797 he read Georg Forster’s *Sakontala*. Although earlier he had been critical of Herder’s interpretation of Indian sources, Herder’s commentary on the play and the general enthusiasm for it in the German principalities stimulated Schlegel’s interest in Indian literature. Second, in 1800 he met the Orientalist Friedrich Majer in Jena, which inspired him to pursue the study of Sanskrit itself” (2010a, p.112).

Still, Friedrich Schlegel embarked on a genuinely systematic study of Sanskrit only when he relocated to Paris in 1802. In Paris, he fortuitously made the acquaintance of Alexander Hamilton, a Scottish naval officer, who had served in the East India Company, and having undertaken exhaustive study of Sanskrit in India, had gained the distinction of being an erudite Sanskrit scholar. Alexander Hamilton had been entrusted with the responsibility to catalogue Sanskrit texts in Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in 1803 and this gave occasion to Friedrich Schlegel’s meeting with Alexander Hamilton there. Jürgen Hanneder depicts Friedrich Schlegel’s acquaintance with Alexander Hamilton in Paris, mentioning that following his return from India “Hamilton came to Paris in 1803 to catalogue the collection of Sanskrit manuscripts there. Now Paris, with its old university was then as it is now an interesting meeting place for scholars. When Hamilton was there, he was attached to one house in rue de Clichy, where Friedrich Schlegel and his wife Dorothea lived and where an interesting group met: the German writer Wilhelmine de Chézy, since 1805 the

wife of the first Paris Sanskritist Antoine-Léonard de Chézy, or the Cologne art collectors Boisserée. Schlegel was trying to widen his scope by learning Persian but then took the opportunity to learn Sanskrit under the guidance of Hamilton.” (Hanneder, [fid4sa-repository.uni-heidelberg.de/4573/1/EuropeanKnowledgeSanskrit.pdf](https://www.fid4sa-repository.uni-heidelberg.de/4573/1/EuropeanKnowledgeSanskrit.pdf)).

Jürgen Hanneder identifies in Friedrich Schlegel’s work *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) the consummation of his long intellectual association with Alexander Hamilton. Making an assessment of Friedrich Schlegel’s close acquaintanceship with Alexander Hamilton in Paris, Jürgen Hanneder remarks that the “result was the first real Indological book written in German, called *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, which was based on original texts rather than on inadequate translations and fanciful travel reports.” (Hanneder, [fid4sa-repository.uni-heidelberg.de/4573/1/EuropeanKnowledgeSanskrit.pdf](https://www.fid4sa-repository.uni-heidelberg.de/4573/1/EuropeanKnowledgeSanskrit.pdf)).

Schlegel enriched his knowledge about India not only through the study of original Sanskrit texts, rather his understanding of India was also supplemented by the translations done by the civil servants located in Calcutta. He, in course of his engagement with Sanskrit texts, arrived at the conviction that India, apart from being the fountainhead of civilization, represented in the form of Sanskrit an ancestral language manifesting links with several European languages. Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> seeks to stress the pivotal significance of Sanskrit in the broader scheme of cultural correspondences in Friedrich Schlegel and emphasizes that in line with “many other thinkers of his generation, Schlegel regarded ancient India as the cradle of civilization, the home of a primordial wisdom that was now beginning to be unlocked through the translations of the Calcutta-based civil servant-scholars of the East India Company. Sanskrit was heralded as the ancestral language, and its literature was expected to play a key role in bringing about the much-awaited spiritual revolution” (p. 204). Schlegel held the belief that human languages emerged and flourished differently under different circumstances among different peoples, and consequently he refrained from acquiescing to the thesis of monogenesis of languages. Maintaining however a distinction between the languages belonging to the flectional group and the rest of the languages, he advocated the view that Sanskrit could be admitted as the source where all languages of the flectional group sprang from. In Sanskrit he discerned a language proximate to the original language (*Ursprache*). Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> contends that Schlegel refuted the thesis of the monogenesis of languages and argued instead that “different languages exhibit radically different grammatical structures, which must be seen as proof of their distinct origins. With respect to grammar, he identifies two major groups of languages: the ‘flectional’ [*Flexion*] group, and all the rest. Elaborating the findings of William Jones, Schlegel contends that all languages belonging to the flectional group derive from Sanskrit. Such flectional languages are Latin, Greek, Persian, and most notably, Greek and German, which bear the closest resemblance to Sanskrit. Although Schlegel is wary of identifying Sanskrit as the parent language of the flectional group, he believes that Sanskrit must be fairly close to that *Ursprache* or “original language”” (p. 205).

Flexional languages retain their distinctive character in as much as the roots constitute the original reservoir of meanings. Commensurate with the modification of the root, plentiful possibilities for changes in meanings are

occasioned. Sanskrit exhibited for Schlegel this capacity to engender the comprehensive possibility of interconnectedness with other languages by virtue of the changes in the root. Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> elucidates this uniqueness of Sanskrit saying that in “the flexional languages, and preeminently so in Sanskrit, the “roots” are what the name itself suggests: a ‘living germinal nucleus’ [*lebendiger Keim*] (...). It is through internal modifications of the root sounds that the root meaning evolves into all possible meanings, in a process of unfolding of unlimited expansive power” (p. 205).

In support of his hypothetical conviction about the interconnectedness of German and other European languages with Sanskrit, Schlegel alluded to the discernible linguistic similarity among them stemming from flecional derivations from Sanskrit root. In this context, he referred to the construction of the words like ‘brother’, ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘sister’ etc., in Sanskrit and European languages, reiterating the conspicuous proximity of the European languages to Indic sources. Taking note of the efforts of Friedrich Schlegel in this direction in his work *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, Konrad Koerner (1990) maintains that Schlegel “provides a series of examples from Greek, Latin, Persian, and German (including Old High German and Low German...), at times even from Celtic (...) or Slavic (...), to demonstrate that these various forms are, despite the changes they may have undergone, derived (“abgeleitet”...) from Indic. It should be added that Schlegel not only compared lexical items, including the well-known terms for ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ (...), but also case endings (...), particles (...), pronouns (...), and other simple basic elements of language (“einfache Grundbestandtheile der Sprache”...)” (p. 247). In this context, substantiating the similarity between Sanskrit and European languages, Schlegel appears standing as embarking on the early endeavors towards paving the way to lay the foundation of comparative linguistics.

Not overtly manifest, yet irrefutable dimension of the affiliation between Sanskrit and European languages in the intellectual endeavors of Schlegel related to his conviction that the future destiny of Christianity was inextricably linked to Hinduism. During his stay in Paris, the conviction prevailed on Schlegel that modern European society stood on the brink of unabating decay and fragmentation. This malaise in society reflected the inner crisis confronting Christianity, which seemed to be lapsing into a state where its inherent unity stood under the imminent threat of dissolution. Schlegel underscored his belief that the decay looming large over Europe could hardly be assessed in isolation from the ‘incapacity for religion’ and the ‘complete numbness of the higher organs’. Roland Taylor (2003) <sup>[12]</sup> refers to the interrelation between the decay of European civilization and the crisis of religious faith perceived by Schlegel, who “writing in the first number of his *Europa*, found the source of disintegration of Europe in the atomization of its culture...And when followed to its roots in the individual consciousness, the decay, diagnosed by Schlegel in terms indistinguishable from those of Novalis, was seen to proceed from an ‘incapacity for religion, the complete numbness of the higher organs’” (p. 136). Schlegel’s turn to the Orient, in particular to India, was plausibly equally motivated by his craving to find a remedy

for the Occident. Ancient India, to him, possessed the unity<sup>2</sup> which seemed now denied to modern European culture and Christianity. Michael Dusche observes the preeminence of the Orient in Schlegel and underlines that in Schlegel’s view, only the Orient “was still capable of a holistic understanding of the world. In the mode of religion, the Orient was still in touch with original unity or, in the words of German idealism, with the Absolute. It is thus from the Orient, which he identifies with India, that Schlegel would like to derive Occident’s remedy” (p. 2).

This unity and the awareness of the Absolute in the Orient dawned at the moment of the revelation in remote antiquity. Schlegel noted with emphasis the pervasiveness of Sanskrit texts with the visualizations of ‘divine’ and ‘revelation’. Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> hints that Schlegel described “the putatively perfect flexional nature of Sanskrit grammar with two seemingly antonymic terms, ‘artistic’ [*kunstreich*] and ‘simple’ [*einfach*]...For Schlegel,...the primeval speakers of Sanskrit had unmediated access to the “primeval divine revelation [*ursprüngliche Offenbarung*]”...” (p. 206). It must not be overlooked though that Schlegel called attention to the errors which had crept in during the passage of time and as a consequence of which the primeval revelation in India had been blemished. Underscoring Schlegel’s awareness of such errors, Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> has noted that even as “Schlegel contends vigorously that Sanskrit literature has to offer “rich treasures” (219) in the field of poetry and philosophy, he is nonetheless anxious to emphasize its inherent limits:

[The] Indian documents show the origins of the error, the first monstrous products which the Spirit [*Geist*] increasingly fabricates and counterfeits, once it has abandoned and lost the simple purity [*Einfalt*] of the divine insight...” (p. 198). Reiterating Schlegel’s observation of these errors which contributed to spoiling the illumination of the primeval divine revelation in India, Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> argues further that owing to “their putative extreme antiquity, Sanskrit texts are presumed to provide the closest links to the primeval moment in history, which is characterized by the highest spiritual clarity and closest proximity with the divine (*das Göttliche*) (e.g., 219). On the other, Schlegel underscores that such texts do not offer a direct link with the divine; in them the primordial light is mixed with later errors...” (p. 204).

As such, in Schlegel’s assessment of the Sanskrit texts, primeval light had become spoiled with the errors of later centuries, and consequently search for direct link with the divine solely with the help of these texts would have been infructuous. Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> maintains that recognizing the limits of the Sanskrit texts, Schlegel, thus, shifted his curiosity and attention to perfection and purity of Sanskrit grammar and identified “the “innermost structure” or “grammar” of the Sanskrit language as the surest carrier of the primordial divine revelation” (p. 205). The idea of

<sup>2</sup> In Upaniṣad, the idea of ‘unity’ is summarized in the notion of ‘*Brahman*’. S. Radhakrishnan observes in his book *The Principal Upaniṣads*: “To the pioneers of the Upaniṣads, the problem to be solved presented itself in the form, what is the world rooted in? What is that by reaching which we grasp the many objects perceived in the world around us? They assume, as many philosophers do, that the world of multiplicity is, in fact, reducible to one single, primary reality which reveals itself to our senses in different forms...The word used in the Upaniṣads to indicate the supreme reality is *brahman*.”

'transparency' of Sanskrit language has been emphasized by Paolo Visigalli in this context, whereby he has underlined 'artistic' and 'simple' quality of Sanskrit as bearing the markers of divine revelation. Friedrich Schlegel had taken note of these qualities of Sanskrit language and he had professed that the primeval speakers of Sanskrit did possess an unmediated access to the primeval divine revelation. Paolo Visigalli (2019) <sup>[14]</sup> reiterates that for Schlegel "the 'artistic simplicity' [*kunstreiche Einfachheit*] (44) of Sanskrit grammar is a result of its transparency. This latter is the expression of the superiority of the mental and spiritual powers of the primeval peoples who produced Sanskrit. Sanskrit grammar retains traces of these peoples' psychic life, a life characterized by "the clearest and most intimate sobriety [*Besonnenheit*]" (63), the "deepest sensations," and "spiritual/mental clarity [*Geistesklarheit*]" . Most fundamentally, the primeval speakers of Sanskrit had unmediated access to the "primeval divine revelation [*ursprüngliche Offenbarung*]" (105), and, consequently, they could grasp the "ancestral natural meanings [...] of letters, root-sounds, and syllables" (42)" (p. 206). With Schlegel, as the emphasis shifted from literary texts to linguistic aspects of Sanskrit, the hope to reclaim the divine essence of Sanskrit by delving into its linguistic structure became all the more luring an endeavor. Friedrich Schlegel's idea of 'oriental renaissance' resonates precisely with this hope. Stephen Cross (2008) cites the sketchy outline of the idea of 'oriental renaissance' in Friedrich Schlegel's seminal book on Indology *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, "Many Indic studies find as many disciples and protectors as Germany and Italy saw spring up in such great numbers for Greek studies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and may they be able to do as many things in as short a time. The Renaissance of antiquity promptly transformed and rejuvenated all the sciences; we might add that it rejuvenated and transformed the world. We could even say that the effects of Indic studies, if these enterprises were taken up and introduced into learned circles with the same energy today, would be no less great and far-reaching" (p. 61). Schlegel was all the more insistent on the obligation of the Germans to retrieve and refine the lost divine primeval wisdom of the Indians as manifested in ancient Sanskrit language, making it accessible to that European culture, which was imperiled by spectacle of disintegration of unity once upheld by Christianity. Robert Cowan (2010) <sup>[2-3]</sup> underlines that Schlegel "finds that it is the destiny of modern Germans to rediscover and further refine the original wisdom of the Indians, which has been sullied by centuries of misinterpretation, desuetude, and ignorance" (2010a, p. 108).

Scholarly engagement with the issue of German Orientalism and the place of Indic studies therein has drawn attention to the conflation of German interest in India with Germany's striving for self-definition. The involvement of German Romantic writers and thinkers with India has been assigned specific significance in the context of the self-understanding of Germans as being destined to accomplish the task of revivifying a spiritually torpid Europe. Germany's self-projection as the leader of Europe remains implicit in this framework and the same has been underlined by some scholars hinting at the notion of "internal colonialism" inherent in German Romantic encounter with India. Robert

Cowan (2010) <sup>[2-3]</sup> emphasizes Germany's aspiration for rejuvenating Europe through Indic studies during Romanticism, stating that "late eighteenth-and nineteenth-century German proponents of Indian wisdom, such as J.G. Herder and Friedrich Schlegel...brought to the study of Sanskrit texts their own search to establish a set of German national origins that were independent of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions. They also strove to postulate how modern Germany might regenerate an enervated Europe and bring about what they felt to be its enlightened (Lutheran or Catholic) destiny" (2010b, 50). Germany's self-perception as the spiritual leader of culturally weary Europe was redolent of the national interests lurking behind passionate exploration of primeval wisdom of India in Sanskrit language. Taking note of this, Sanskrit-scholars like Sheldon Pollock have alluded to the idea of "internal colonialism" in this German intellectual endeavor, which Robert Cowan (2010) <sup>[2-3]</sup> has sought to stress, saying "Pollock argues that German intellectuals were engaged in forms of "internal colonialism" which employed ideas from and about India, Sanskrit, and Hinduism for their own national interests" (2010b, 50).

A differing argument has surfaced recently that calls attention to Friedrich Schlegel's attempt to reject a model that separates West from East and that gravitates towards a broader intermingling of cultures from West and East. Gary Handwerk (1998) underlines this aspect in Friedrich Schlegel, arguing "Schlegel specifically attacks the way that positing a sharp separation between European and Asian cultures has led scholars to invent a dichotomy between a falsely homogenized European style and spirit in literature and a purportedly "oriental" one. Instead, "the inhabitants of Asia and the Europeans are to be considered as members of a single family whose history simply cannot be separated if one wishes to understand the whole"" (p. 238).

The invocation of a 'single family' of the inhabitants of Asia and the Europeans has led to further scrutiny of the vestiges of the race-centered facets in Schlegel's preoccupation with Indic studies. It has not remained unnoticed that Friedrich Schlegel favorably inclined towards positing an 'Aryan' common root of the Germans and the Indians, which later helped substantiate an "Aryan myth". In this context, it is apposite to argue with Robert Cowan (2010) <sup>[2-3]</sup> who notes that Friedrich Schlegel "makes very strong claims about the identification of ancient Indians and modern Germans, about mass migrations out of northern India that eventually led to the settling of both northern and southern Europe, thus bringing together the Hellenistic tradition of describing "Aryan" superiority, the Reformation-era tradition of describing all Europeans as Germans, and the emerging anthropological theories of his own time, establishing a line of thought that Poliakov argues led to the "Aryan myth"" (2010a, pp. 107-08).

Schlegel's involvement with Indic studies offers insights into the idea of cultural harmony and yet the instances of racial leanings can barely be disregarded in this intellectual enterprise. It comes, hence, not as a surprise that Schlegel's engagement with India has been analyzed as an intellectual undertaking, whose dimensions transcend mere philological and philosophical concerns and touch on such tendentious questions as that of 'origin' and 'destiny of all people'. Robert Cowan's (2010) <sup>[2-3]</sup> observation is illuminating in

this wider context, when he affirms that “scholarship on German Orientalism has oscillated between exposés of racism, the damning or deepening of supposed philosophical parallels, the further use of empirical science to prove or disprove theories of origin, and arguments for how the lessons gleaned from such investigations might lead to the enlightened destiny of all people” (2010b, p. 55).

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