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REVISITING THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT INDIA
THE NEED FOR A NEW VISION

SEVENTEENTH GONDA LECTURE
Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I consider it a great – and unexpected – honour to have been asked to deliver the 17th Gonda Lecture, funded by one of the main 20th c. Indian scholars, a great specialist of Vedic and Sanskrit literature, which I am not, a very good exponent of Hindu religions, which are not my preferred subject, the more so in a country which has trained so many first-class young scholars that it is forced to export them abroad for the great benefit of those countries wise enough to give them a position. In these circumstances, the safest for me is to avoid the intricacies of Sanskrit philology and literature and talk mainly about what I feel ablest to teach, i.e. Indian history.

It is exactly what I tried to do 25 years ago, when I was elected at a chair in College de France which up to that time was called ‘langues et littératures sanskrrites’, a name which I changed, as it was my privilege, into ‘Histoire du monde indien’, i.e. in Anglo-Indian ‘History of India and Greater India.’ The innovation was mainly in the name and in the limitations, if I dare say so, I pretended to respect, which of course I did not do. Indeed, I was trying to follow the example of Sylvain Lévi and Jean Filliozat who, in the same institution, did not hesitate to behave as true and good historians and who taught, like Hendriks Kern and Jan Gonda, that India extends much farther than the frontiers of British India and much beyond the areas where Sanskrit had been an indigenous language. Dropping the word “Sanskrit” and replacing “langues et littératures” by “history” was nevertheless a kind of novelty, for some even of scandal.

Indeed, although, as every historian of Ancient India, I am quite conscious of the prevalent role of Sanskrit in shaping what we now call India and of the importance of literature as a source for the history of Indian culture and mainstream ideology, I was claiming that language, even a sacred one, and literature, so prestigious be they and worth being studied for themselves, are also components of a larger subject, the history and changing cultures of populations who knew and respected them, but spoke many different languages, some of them without any link with Sanskrit, and developed other kinds of literatures, oral or written, which were not without influence even on Sanskrit texts and some of the beliefs and ways of life they express. That is now a truism. Many universities now boast chairs in contemporary Indian languages or history of modern India. That was not evident 25 years ago. In the same way as some Classical scholars lament over the steep decline of Ancient Greek and Latin in the curricula of colleges and universities, many Indologists deplore the increasing loss of positions for Sanskrit in European and American Universities, and even the growing disinterest for it in India proper at the benefit of contemporary India, i.e. the much smaller Republic of India. I do it too. Indeed a part of that lecture will try to demonstrate that no history of India can dispense with Sanskrit and its texts. But no history of India can anymore dispense with a minimal knowledge of the other languages, texts, oral productions and non-sanskritic religions and creeds of that cultural area we now call India, a definition of which is not easy to give. And no history of India can dispense with much respect for them.

Not surprisingly if we consider the way indology was taught in Europe during the last two centuries, the notion that it is possible to write a history of Ancient India, i.e. India before the advent of the Moslems, is still challenged: how would it be possible to write such a history when it is well known that history never interested Indians and
that there is no Indian Thucydides nor Titus Livius? And why should we waste our time in studying the history of an area which had so few contacts with our countries before colonization? Outside the territory of today Republic of India, there exist very few chairs for Indian history and almost none for Ancient India history. But there are many places where Indian culture and civilization are supposedly taught as if there were no variations neither in times nor in places. It is a kind of India explained to foreigners, in the same way as we are used to give summer courses in French civilization for foreign students, where they learn that French drink wine, eat snails and frogs and that Racine is the last French playwright. Worse, the thus labelled Indian civilization is mainly the way of life of upper-strata brahmins and Gandhi-followers. Moslems, Buddhists, revolutionary freedom fighters, dalits and outcastes, even trading communities are not deemed worth to belong to Indian civilization, which evokes too often the slogan “Eternal India” of the Indian Tourist Office and the “Sanatana Dharma” of the Vishva Hindu Parishad. Any historian of India knows well that that “Eternal Dharma” is something relatively new, very different from the Veda it claims as its source. Hindu theoreticians, who exponed the theory of the four successive yugas, each of them worse than the preceding, and Buddhist believers, who deplored the inevitable decay and disparition of dharma, were of the same advice, with the difference that they were more pessimistic than we are. No one also would dare, at least I hope so, deny that Urdu poetry and songs are as much part of today Indian culture as Kālidāsa and that Tamil culture did not borrow everything from Sanskrit.

There was never in Ancient India a Herodotus nor a Tacitus. History thus conceived is a product of Ancient Greece, and as such, it is no surprise that it was not cultivated in Ancient India. It does not mean that Indians were not interested in their past and did not record it. What is problematic is that we cannot trust the accuracy of these records, be they lists of kings like in the Epics and the Purāṇa, lists of patriarchs in the Buddhist Annals, sometimes even genealogies in the praśasti of Hindu kings. But one could tell the same about any Epic or official historiography in any language. These works are only a starting point, to be used only when checked and completed through archives, inscriptions and excavations. Ancient Indian archives on birchbark, palmleaves or paper are no more available. But we know for sure they existed and we may hope to discover some of them in the future, in the same way as Buddhist manuscripts of the centuries around our era have recently surfaced in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Inscriptions are known by thousands and many lie still unpublished. Excavations are going on. One may rightly complain that the available data are not entirely published, or not as well and quickly as we should expect. One may also rightly state that the data thus published relate to small parts of the subcontinent, or to minute details, and that the bulk of the history of the whole of Ancient India still eludes us. But when we compare the history of Ancient India as portrayed in the handbooks available sixty years ago with the picture that professional historians, archaeologists, epigraphists now have in their minds, the changes are tremendous, so important that no one up to now dared to make some obvious conclusions. I shall first point to the enormous growth of our knowledge in some domains and the consequent change in perspective relatively to these specialized fields, then try to see whether generalizations valid for the whole of Ancient India are still possible, in other words whether the geographical concept of Ancient India still has some effectiveness.
Up to 1925, after a few considerations about palaeolithic and neolithic hunters/gatherers, people still less civilized than the Bhils of Rajasthan or the Madhya Pradesh Gonds, Indians of course, for they inhabited the subcontinent, but of no impact on its civilization and history, every handbook on Ancient India used to begin with a subdivision called “Vedic India”. The starting point of history and civilization was the coming, branded an invasion, of tribes of herdsmen who spoke a language which later would become Classical Sanskrit and still later would evolve into the various prakrits, *apabhraṃśa*, and contemporary languages of Northern India. These people, often called Āryas or Indo-aryans, the far-off cousins of most European scholars who wrote these accounts (although some were Jews and so supposed to be of Semitic origin), brought with them a superior civilization characterized by a perfect language, a well-structured social organization, and a religion whose priests used to sing hymns composed in a very elaborate fashion with a clever use of the many resources of the Vedic idiom.

Few traditional Hindus would read these English accounts, more than often written in barbaric languages like German or French. Still less used to pay attention to the translations of the Veda these foreigners used to print. But they would gladly agree that Vedic Sanskrit is a perfect language and that the *g-*Vedic hymns are the summum of sophistication, the abode of a superhuman truth and the basis of the true Indian civilization to come, at least until the catastrophic advent of the Moslems.

That picture of Indian early history was simple and easy to figure out. Groups of blond-haired and blue-eyed herdsmen-warriors entered an almost empty India, pushing to the South and East scattered Dravidian- and Munda-speaking hunters-gatherers and destroying them, with the help of Indra, when they dared resist. These groups settled first in Panjab, then colonized the whole of Northern India, bringing there agriculture, which apparently they discovered, constructing villages, then cities, and finally carrying South their superior civilization. Dravidians nevertheless kept on their ancestral languages, but so much overloaded with Sanskrit words that they were a major evidence for the avowed superiority of Sanskrit. Some wild tribes in the East and Centre of India alone were left outside that grandiose picture of the progress of civilization in India. Moslems also were left out, and also the fact that the common language of India was Persian during almost one millenium. But these Moslems did not belong to the India which Europeans were interested in. Still in 1953, the French handbook *L’Inde classique, Manuel des Études Indiennes*, an unsurpassed achievement in French and still a very valuable tool, did not say a word about Moslem India although, in some parts, it gives a description of religious and intellectual India till the 20th century.

As for the date of the entering of the Āryans into India and the collection of hymns into the *Rg-Veda-saṃhitā*, European scholars were of diverging opinions. After a while, most agreed that the *saṃhitā* could not be later, nor much earlier than 1000 BC, a calculation based on a datation of the most ancient *Upaniṣads*, some concepts of which may also be found in the teachings of Buddha, at that time supposed to have died c. 480 BC or even earlier. Hindus of course did not accept that late datation.

The picture changed dramatically with the discovery in 1924 and subsequent excavation of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro (01). There in Panjab, in the birth place of Vedic India, existed huge towns, with considerable amenities, a sophisticated agriculture, a developed trade with Mesopotamia and a large use of writing, i.e. all
the characteristics of a great civilization at a time when, according to the Rg-Veda, Āryas were still warriors and herdsmen without any knowledge of trade, agriculture, architecture nor writing. The scenario had to be changed and Sir Mortimer Wheeler assigned himself the task to do it. The changes were minor. Our far-off cousins the Indo-Aryans, not yet debilitated by the Capuan pleasures of urban civilization, led by their warlike kings and priests, thanks to their superior social and military organization destroyed entirely the Indus towns inhabited by Dravidian-speaking peoples, killed everybody there, and pushed into the Indian jungles the few survivors who had for only resource to go South and elaborate there an entirely new civilization. Meanwhile, Aryan civilization was conquering the whole of India as said in the previous scenario, always valuing much more cattle-breeding, inherited from Indo-european life-style, than agriculture, learnt from the Indus civilization.

That picture, although outdated for many decades now, is still the prevalent one. It does not fit at all traditional Hindus, who claim that the Harappan towns were Sanskrit speaking and that Vedic civilization is autochthonous in India, only damaged by the advent of foreign uncivilized tribes in the same way as it was later endangered by the Moslem and British invasions. The more important Harappan settlements being situated in Pakistan, that could lead to a kind of irredentism. Surprisingly it does not seem to be so. Indian nationalism limits itself to give a new name to the Indus (or Harappan) civilization, now called by some Indus-Sarasvati civilization, bringing it back by the sole
magic of words within the borders of the Republic of India.

The picture is now quite different and not always known in India proper for the data are often published in German, Russian and French and for lack of local expertise in comparative grammar. I shall not enter into the details of chronology, which rests on a large number of $^{14}$C datations for archaeological artefacts and on assumptions mainly based on Near Eastern textual evidence for the date of the Indo-Iranian migrations.

It seems quite sure now that the decay of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, averred c. 1800 BC, took place earlier than the advent of the Āryas into Panjab, now dated sometimes between 1700 and 1400 BC. In other words, the Āryas did not bring about the disappearance of the Indus Civilization. Since Jules Bloch and, more recently, Josef Elfenbein demonstrated that the Dravidian Brahui language is a late comer in Sindh and Baluchistan, there is no more any compelling evidence to believe that Indus cities were populated by Dravidian-speaking peoples. An examination of the Vedic non-Indo-Aryan vocabulary first by F.B.J. Kuiper, recently by Michael Witzel, points to the presence of loan-words of non-Dravidian origin, which means that the Āryas encountered in Northern India not an homogeneous population, but peoples speaking different languages.

Any analysis of the Rg-Vedic hymns show that they refer to wandering groups of herdsmen and warriors, with little knowledge of agriculture and settled life in villages. It was assumed that, having crossed un-inhabited Centralasiatic deserts, they learned agriculture from the indigenous peoples of Panjab. Things have dramatically changed since the excavation of ancient towns by V. Sarianidi in the vicinity of Merv (Turkmenistan), notably Gonur (02). There remains of a highly developed urban and agricultural civilization, flourishing in the third and early second millennia BC (c. 2500-1750), were dug out. Settlements exhibiting the same characteristics were also discovered in Southern Uzbekistan and Northern Afghanistan, whence the name Bactro-Margian Archaeological Complex (BMAC) or Oxus civilization now given to that civilization, linked with the great contemporary civilizations of Mesopotamia, Iran and the Indus Valley. As instances of that interaction, we may point to the existence of a Harappan settlement in Shortughaï, in North-Eastern Afghanistan, and to the quite plausible suggestion that the famous Mohenjo-Daro bust (03) of a so-called priest-king is indeed an import from some Oxus workshop, or the product of some craftsman trained there.

Maps show that the Āryas, whether they came through Northern Iran or through Central Asia, had to cross Margiana and Bactria before entering Panjab (04). We cannot anymore assume that Āryan migrants on their way never encountered towns, villages, clay buildings, irrigation works nor fields. My colleagues Witzel and Lubotsky have even made lists of Sanskrit words of non-Indo-European origin, relating either to agriculture, animals or buildings, which may have been borrowed from the unknown language(s) of the Oxus civilization.

The importance of these assumptions for the historian of Ancient India cannot be overestimated. If the description of material life as deduced from Rg-Veda utterances is not congruent with established facts, but the ideal and un-historical vision of some Ārya groups, the Rg-Veda is no trustworthy source for reconstructing the history of Panjab in the late second millennium BC, the more so for it has been pointed out for long that some hymns, or the nucleus of some hymns, may date back to a time when the Āryas were still
wandering North of the Hindukush mountains. We may also suppose that the non-Vedic characteristics of some early Indian conceptions are not necessarily borrowings from the indigenous Indian peoples the Āryas vanquished or assimilated, but Āryan ideas which never found place in the Vedas.

But this is not all. A number of prominent scholars like J. Kellens and O. Prods Skaervø now believe that the separation of the Iranian and Indo-aryan groups took place c. 2000 BC and that the nucleus of some Avestic and Rg-Vedic hymns goes back to that time. In other words, many Rg-Vedic hymns were created during the second millenium BC before being collected into a sāṁhitā and fixed c. 1000 BC. But how to explain that the Iranian religion, as reconstructed from the Avestic gātha and Yasna Haptanḥāiti, and the Vedic religion, as reconstructed from the Rg-Veda, are so different although their language and wording are so close and even keep using formulaic expressions going back to much earlier Indo-European times? Most handbooks assert that the discrepancy results from changes brought by Zoroaster, so important that they deserve to be called a revolution. It now appears to many that Zoroaster is a mythic person and that, in some respects, the gātha and Yasna Haptanḥāiti are more archaic than the Rg-Veda. If so, there is no reason to assume that the Avesta only is innovative. The Rg-Veda could also be innovative, which would better explain the growing distance between Iranian and Indian religions. That puts in danger the conventional wisdom according to which the Rg-Veda is so much conservative that it is the best source for reconstructing the Indo-Iranian undivided religion, as e.g. most Russian archaeologists do, and less so the Indo-European mythology or ideology, as e.g. Dumézil used to do.
That would be indeed a revolution. But, without going so far, how can we still reconstruct the history of Ancient India, in fact limited to Ancient Panjab, in the second half of the 2nd millenium BC, if the Rg-Veda is in part a Centralasiatic document and the idealized vision of people referring to a time much earlier? And how will our Indian colleagues agree with a reconstruction so contrary both to Hindu views and to conventional wisdom?

Let us jump over six or more centuries of Indian history, leave aside the Epics, which many Indians still consider as truthful historical documents, and go directly to the chapter “Buddhist India” of many handbooks still in use. It is a reconstruction using data culled from the Pāli canon, i-e from Śrī Laṅkese texts, translations into the ancient language of Madhya Pradesh of oral discourses of the Buddha supposedly pronounced in the ancient language of Bihar and thus relating – as far as material culture and social fabrics are concerned – only to Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. That evidence was used to reconstruct the history of that part of India, equated to the whole of India, during the life-time of the Buddha, gone to nirvāṇa according to most European scholars c. 480 BC at the age of 80 years. A first correction was made by A. Bareau who insisted that only data found both in mahāsāṅghika and sthaviravādin texts, i-e antedating the first council at Pālaliputra c. 350 BC, could go back to Buddha’s times. Any other evidence should be later. A. Bareau used that criterion for his biography of the Buddha, although not always decisive as demonstrated by G. Schopen years ago. Historians of India do not, and usually keep on reconstructing the history of 6th c. India from Pāli texts, even late ones like the jātaka, supplementing them when possible with archaeological data partly dated by comparison with these same texts.

A symposium convened in 1988 by H. Bechert came to the conclusion that the Theravādin (Sinhalese) tradition which places the nirvāṇa 218 years before the consecration of Aśoka and which, after many necessary corrections, enabled most scholars (not the Buddhist communities) to place that event c. 480 BC, had no more validity than the Sanskrit tradition which places it 100 years before the same consecration, i.e. c. 360 BC. These numbers both result from back-calculations long post eventum and only indicate that the parinirvāṇa took place many years before the reign of Aśoka. In the same way, 80 is a traditional number used to say that the duration of life of the Buddha was much longer than that of most human beings. The result is that there is now no sure evidence for the date of the nirvāṇa. Most European scholars place now his passing away c. 420 or 400. It is only a reasonable guess. Buddhists the world over stick to their traditional dates.

That guess should nevertheless be important for historians. No ancient Buddhist source relating to the Buddha’s times, i-e to the 5th c. BC (not the 6th as written in our handbooks), no sūtra has any allusion to Gandhāra nor Śindh, at that time loosened parts of the Achaemenid Empire, nor to Eastern India, nor to the countries South of the Narmada river. These sources present us with a picture of growing States impossible to reconcile with the Puranic data, but not very different from the political structure of North-Western India at the time of Alexander’s inroad. If they go back to c. 420, we are now in a better position to understand how Candragupta could build c. 313 an empire which, under Aśoka, covered almost the whole of India, the far South excluded, the only pre-British empire which can truly be called pan-Indian. If c. 400 Northern India
certainly (from Greek and Buddhist sources) and Southern India (from inference) were a mosaic of growing kingdoms as big as today Indian States, a few decisive victories in the field were enough for Candragupta to bring them into his power eighty years later. This narrative is entirely irreconcilable with any Puranic list. It is an European history of India which may be not easily agreed upon by some of our Indian colleagues.

Most European were mainly interested in Alexander's conquests narrated by Greek and Latin authors formerly widely read in European high schools and colleges. For the young British officers sent to India, Alexander was their predecessor and model. At the end of the 19th c., scholars became more and more interested into the Greek kingdoms established in Bactria and Northern India. These, almost ignored by the preserved Greek and Latin literature, not better in that respect than Indian sources, at that time were known mainly from a few coins bought in India. Sir Alexander Cunningham, with his series on *The coins of Alexander's successors in the East*, was as usual a pioneer of these researches which culminated in the great visionary book of W.W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*. Today this book is outdated and may justly be considered as a very good detective novel produced by an Europeocentered and colonialist author. But it is as breathtaking as an Epic and, although now proved wrong in most details and assumptions, nevertheless gives a fairly good impression of that period and region of the world, which Tarn, a Scot lawyer, never visited.

Tarn could make use of the results of one large excavation only, conducted by Sir John Marshall in Taxila, in his time available only through short reports printed in the *Annual Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India*. Since, many field explorations and excavations were conducted in Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, less in the territory of the Republic of India. Not all of them are published in a satisfactory way, some are as yet almost unpublished, a few even not satisfactorily recorded. Nevertheless they give us a much better picture of the material culture of these regions under the Greeks and their Indo-Scythian successors, a denomination coined by A. Cunningham, now outdated but still very descriptive. But these many regular excavations did not yield any information on the political history of the region, only a broad stratification, in great part previously worked out by numismatists, of the powers which succeeded each other.

Most of the information on the political history and changes in religious conceptions and affiliations comes from straight finds, most often of unknown exact provenance, specially numerous for 30 years in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In these two countries, the crumbling away state apparatus is unable and often unwilling to stop illegal diggings, a result also of the huge increase in population which leads to intensive digging to build new houses.

Thus appeared in the London and Tokyo markets statues and silver artefacts, but also early Buddhist manuscripts, Greek papyri, Bactrian letters and documents, inscriptions in Greek, Bactrian, Sogdian and Middle-Indian languages, thousands of coins, a number of fakes also. They are supplemented by rare inscriptions found during regular excavations, e.g. in Surkh Kotal (06) and Termez, or systematic surveys, especially those conducted and so well published by our Heidelberg colleagues. The results are impressive, and no synthesis has been done as yet.

We know now the names and coinages of many more kings than Tarn or Narain. Overstrikes and the analysis of hoards, some inscriptions also, enabled scholars to
establish the true order of their succession. Uncertainties remain, of course, for a new discovery can anytime bring to light the name of a still unknown king and it is clear that Gandhāra and Panjab were seldom unified under a unique king. That could be true of Bactria also. Many names are names of contemporary rulers, often fighting with each other. As we lack reliable information on the find-places of most coins, specially the bronze ones which, till recent times, did not interest collectors, it is quite difficult to trace the changing borders of their possessions. Nevertheless the relative chronology of the Greek, Śaka, Indo-parthian and Kushan rulers till Vāsudeva I, in Bactria and Northern India, is now known with some certainty. Some of them, e.g. Menander the Greek, Wima Kadphises and Kaniska the Kushans, controlled huge Indian territories extending from Bengal in the East to Gujarat in the West. In other words, during five or six centuries, the whole of Northern India was subject to these invaders (07). Their story is mainly an Indian story although almost totally ignored from Indian sources. But there are still two huge gaps in the available data. First we have no certitude at all on the absolute chronology. The degree of uncertainty now varies between a few and 50
years, which in fact does not make a great difference. Scholars nevertheless would like to know which rulers established the vikrama and śaka eras, whose starting point lies in that very period, and which year marks the beginning of the Azes and Kaniška eras. Many solutions were offered during the last 20 years, including some by me. I dare say that none of them, including mines, is satisfactorily proved. The other black hole is the relation existing between Northern India and the Indian powers South of the Narmada river, of which not much is known either. Except may be for trade links, it is thus for the time being impossible to write a connected history of the whole Indian subcontinent during these crucial centuries.

Why crucial? These were years of wars, i.e. of destructions, killings by thousands, enslavements and deportations probably. It should have been a bloody period, although neither coins nor inscriptions tell us anything about these events. But at the same time, under the rule of these invaders, so proud of their non-Indian origin as being up to the end officially portrayed as foreigners, wearing a Greek tunic or armour and a diadem or a Macedonian hat (08) or helmet when Indo-Greeks, a Centralasiatic long-sleeved coat and armour when Kushans (09), or sitting astride a totally un-Indian war-horse when Śakas (10), India became for the first time a world-power, not a political world-power but an intellectual world-power.

Although new data were made known during the last thirty years, I shall not deliver here a new discourse on India international trade nor on the so-called Silk Road. But it is strange that Northern India, which was politically well connected with the Eastern Mediterranean States since Achaemenid times and Alexander’s inroads, seem to have been much better known there in the 1st c. AD. Of course, the discovery of the monsoon was a major factor in that two-way relationship with the Mediterranean world. But if India had only been a crumbling and infighting country at that time, no
trade, no intellectual encounters would have been possible. Now the end of the first century BC and the first century AD, a time of wars and invasions when the last Indo-Greeks were destroyed or incorporated by successive waves of Iranian and Centralasiatic invaders, are also the time when Buddhism became for the first time a world-religion and Buddhist art a world-art. Finds of kharoṣṭhī manuscripts somewhere near by Jālalābād, in Eastern Afghanistan, and in Bajaur, on the Pakistano-Afghan border, demonstrate the presence of mainstream Buddhist communities and even of mahāyāna followers in that far-off corner of geographical India at latest since the early 1st c. AD Buddhists were present in that region since Aśoka or a few decades later, but there is a manifest increase in the number of stūpa and monasteries built in early Śaka times, notably under Azes I and II (if there is an Azes II). Many inscriptions from the valleys
surrounding Peshawar thus record the establishing of Buddhist stūpa and relics “in places where previously there was none” (11). The early 1st c. AD is also the time when the first Buddha images appear, both in Mathurā and Gandhāra (12, 13), well before Kaniska who does not seem anymore responsible for a Northern expansion of Buddhism begun well before his reign.

Buddhism indeed soon jumped over the Hindukush mountains. Buddhist monasteries were built in Bactria since 50 AD at latest. We all know that from that country Buddhist monks started for Xinjiang and from there brought Buddhism to China, Japan and Korea. That conquest of the East was helped, it is said, by a multiplication
of trade caravans made possible by the Kushana pax. I always thought that the role of traders in the expansion of Buddhism was certainly less than usually told: Aśoka made more for its expansion than any Indian merchant. War and political patronage seem also more important than trade for its 1st c. progress. The inscriptions found by our German colleagues along the Karakoram Highway, which date from the 1st to the 6th c. AD, demonstrate contacts with Northern India which cannot be attributed mainly to trade for no beast of burden could ever make use of some portions of these routes. The money lavishly spent by petty kings, i.e. tribal chiefs, of the North-Western border for establishing Buddhist monasteries came, I suspect, from the plundering of Northern India by the Śaka and Kushan armies they were accompanying and helping. The foundation of Buddhist monasteries on both sides of the Hindukush was probably made under the patronage of converted warlords with possessions and functions on both sides of the mountain ridge. Brahmans were also on the move: the same Oḍi and Apraca petty kings which established stūpa in the valleys surrounding Peshawar bore Hindu names, which points to their patronage of court brahmans (14). These tribal chieftains probably exchanged at that time their non-Indo-Aryan maternal language for Gāndhārī.

In the 1st c. AD, for the first time in history, a tight network of Buddhist establishments existed from the extreme South to the extreme North of India. Buddhist monks used to travel extensively over the whole of geographical India. They brought Middle-Indian languages, direct heirs to Sanskrit, in places where they were not previously spoken and a North-Indian way of life which these same regions did not necessarily follow at that time. That movement, begun under Aśoka, attained its apex under foreign kings, a fact recognized by the Buddhist tradition which attributes it (wrongly) to Kaniṣka. It went much beyond the limits ascribed to Ancient India in our handbooks: from a cultural point of view, Śrī Lanka was at that time part of India, the more so that some of its population was of Dravidian origin; from a political point of view, and partly from a cultural point of view, Iranian-speaking Bactria was also part of India and its history part of Indian history. The petty kings of Gilgit and Hunza, who probably used to speak a proto-Burushaski idiom, most probably acknowledged the overlordship of Kaniṣka although the difficult journey from Gilgit to Taxila or Peshawar took c. 3 months. Their officials were able to write at least some Gāndhārī words in
kharoṣṭhī (15). In Loulan/Niya, on the other side of the Karakoram range, kharoṣṭhī was used to write the local administrative language, heavily overlaid with loanwords and calques from Gāndhārī.

That Indian conquest of the world is much more than a Buddhist conquest of the world, for Buddhist monks brought with them, into the Centralasiatic countries they went to, together with Buddhist texts, paintings and statues, a number of concepts common both to Hinduism and Buddhism and pan-Indian skills like astrology, medicine, mathematics, scripts etc.

Gandhāran monks had close links with other North-Indian monks. At least since Kanishka, in the same way as in Mathurā, Sanskrit began to creep into Gandhārī, their Middle-Indian native language. The movement accelerated so fast that from the 4th c. on at latest, all Buddhist texts all over the subcontinent, with the sole exception of the theravādin ones, were rewritten or written in more or less correct Sanskrit and in brāhmi script, and most Buddhist monks, in India and Central Asia, were able to understand, write and probably converse in the same more or less good Sanskrit. Sanskrit, till then a fixed language used only by brahmans, mainly for ritual purposes, became the unifying language of India.

I do not say the unifying language of Indian Buddhists and Jains, for at the same time North Indian kings of foreign origin began to use Sanskrit as a court and administrative language and writers at their court, most probably, began to use Sanskrit for opera non linked with religion nor ritual. I shall not trace again that tremendous

(15)
event, first pointed out by Sylvain Lévi, now described in a masterly way, which I shall not dare equal, by Sheldon Pollock in his *Language of the Gods in the World of Men*. I would only say that if you translate into Sanskrit the Rabatak inscription, written in Bactrian, in Northern Afghanistan, by Kaniška officials taking their inspiration from Iranian models, you get the exact equivalent of all *praśasti* to come.

Very fast all Indian kings, who up to that time used Middle-Indian dialects for administrative purposes, changed to Sanskrit and new tools of prestige: Sanskrit bombastic self-panegyrics all written on the same model, charters of donation mixing ready-made Sanskrit sentences with topographic precisions in the local idiom. They patronized Sanskrit scholars to write prestige kāvya poetry and śāstra and gave endowments to brahmans for, besides their highly respected religious function, brahmanical families were the best if not the only schools for Sanskrit learning. We should also assume that the court and the officials of non-brahmanic birth mastered also Sanskrit and needed no interpreter to understand and probably appreciate Sanskrit plays and kāvya, Epics and administrative documents. This patronage of Sanskrit and Sanskrit learning probably played a major role in the diffusion all over India of brahmanical culture and religious thought and practices.

There are enough Sanskrit inscriptions to demonstrate that from the far-off and pretty wild Gilgit in the North till Cape Comorin in the South no Indian kingdom, be it under a Buddhist or a Hindu ruler, dispensed with the use of Sanskrit. All over India, during many centuries, patronage and official use of Sanskrit were a self-evident obligation which every king, be it petty or all-powerful, voluntarily assumed. That Sanskrit-mania extended to many countries of South-Eastern Asia, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, etc. If we add that the official language of *theravādin* countries like Śrī Laṅka was Pāli, and that Sanskrit scholars had few difficulties in understanding it, we may say that during a large part of the 1st millenium AD any Sanskrit scholar, wherever he was born and trained, felt at home not only in the whole subcontinent, but, in the same degree, in what my Bengali predecessors used to call Greater India and my American colleague Sheldon Pollock now calls the “Sanskrit cosmopolis”.

It may be pointed out that other languages at times played the same role, Greek κοινή in the Middle East, Latin in Europe, Persian from Stambul to Jakarta, now English etc. There are two stunning differences which make Sanskrit a special case. The first is, as pointed out by Pollock, that the spread of Sanskrit owes nothing to war nor conquest: the use of Sanskrit was always a voluntarily choice. The second is that Sanskrit, when it first became the official language of North-Indian kings, was for at least 400 years what linguists call a dead language, i.e. a language which may be in daily use in some fraction of the population, but does not change anymore and is consequently taught by rote so as to conform to unchanging phonetical and grammatical rules. The strange idea of using for administration and prestige a language which nobody could understand without learning it could only arise in a large multilingual country where no living language did boast any special prestige, where most local languages, those we call the Middle-Indian dialects, were separating so fast as to impede communication between officials and people of different origins, where Sanskrit only had an aura of prestige in the entire population: Hindus, for Brahman priests were keeping on uttering utterances in Sanskrit as they used to do for centuries; Jainas and Buddhists for their respective monastic communities were beginning to teach Sanskrit to their novices so that they be able to
read and understand texts now rewritten in Sanskrit and be able to travel all over India and even abroad. That was North India in the first two centuries AD and it makes sense, as Sylvain Lévi and Sheldon Pollock pointed out, to attribute the initial use of Sanskrit as a kingly secular language to a ruler of foreign origin who had no preference nor special respect for any Indian language: he and his close followers proudly kept to their maternal un-Indian language, unfit of course for governing Northern India.

It should be stressed that the Sanskrit-using countries of South-East Asia have in common with the non-Indo-Aryan-speaking countries of the subcontinent much more than the use of Sanskrit as a kingly language. The bilingual upper classes of Tamil Nadu for instance used as a living everyday language an idiom whose origin, structure and lexicon was entirely foreign to Sanskrit. In Cambodia also the living language had no link whatever with Sanskrit. The upper strata religions in both countries were the same, with the exception that there were no Jinas in Cambodia. Kings in both countries used to build huge stone temples according to the same śāstras, but did not care to build impressive palaces nor even towns with stone houses. In both countries the main staples were rice and coconuts, etc. The main differences lay probably in the social structure, about which we do not know much.

If so, one may wonder why no historian ever tried to write a connected or comparative history of South and South-East India. On the contrary most histories of Ancient India contain chapters both on North and South India although the connection between Gilgit and Vijayanagar, apart of the use of Sanskrit, seems most of the time doubtful. The answer is well known: we are doing exactly what the British historians used to do since the 19th c.: we are still writing the history of British India, in its British limits in 1914, with the exception of Burma, no more part of the Indian Empire since 1937.

That leads to strange consequences. British Ceylon was no part of the British Indian Vice-Royalty, so we do not give the same treatment to the old wars between Tamils and Śrí Lanka as to the wars between Pallavas and Cālukyas. British never succeeded in conquering Nepal, so no history of India includes a chapter on Nepal, so much linked with Mithila.

It is not too bold, I hope, to say that due to huge gaps in our documentation and the fact that some parts of today India are much better documented than others at a given time, due also to the fact that the subcontinent was seldom unified and that, at times, Southern States were without any contact with the Northernmost ones, it would be better to start by constructing regional histories, e.g. of Panjab or Gujarat, then supra-regional transitory entities, many of which would not coincide with any polity, e.g. a Central Asian-Northern India entity, or a Tamil-South-East Asian entity, then show how these supra-regional entities both combined and disappeared to result now into a number of States one of which only calls itself India. That program should not be considered either as a novelty or a scandal. It starts only from the assumption, or knowledge, that any political structure is the product of a complex history and is perforce transitory. Our colleagues who are undertaking the daunting task of writing histories of today Europe, in its present borders now pushed much farther East than ten years ago, will necessarily act that way, without provoking any scandal, for everyone in Europe knows that there is no autochthonous European, no eternal Europe, and that today Europe is a political construction which some of us gladly accept and contribute to
when others are more reluctant.

I am very much afraid that no Indian historian of India can approve that kind of program. Writing an unconventional history of India when comfortably teaching in a European University does not confront you without any danger; at least when you do not draw your salary from a Hindu or Moslem foundation. Writing it in India may be more problematic. I would like to pay homage to the courage of our Indian colleagues who tried to establish the truth during the Ayodhya affair and now have to demonstrate that Hanuman never built any bridge between India and Śrī Lanka and that the Rāmāyaṇa is no historical document.

Our Indian colleagues face the task to contribute to the unity of their country at a time when some of its borders are contested and separatist movements are active in some States. They do it voluntarily for they are justly proud to be Indians. That is one of the reasons which explain that most young historians of India today concentrate their efforts on the territories South of the present Indo-Pakistani and Indo-Bangladeshi borders. They act as if the present borders of the Republic of India were fixed for eternity, and in a sense we should felicitate them to do it. Thinking, as I do, that the Partition was a tragedy is not the same thing as claiming that some territories, now under a foreign power, belong to Eternal India and should revert to it as soon as possible. We know which price Europe had to pay for irredentism. I do not wish India nor Pakistan nor Bangladesh to make the same experience.

The result, which I deeply regret, is that a gap is fast widening between Indian and non-Indian historians of Ancient India. It has nothing in common with the behaviour of Orientalists as characterized by Edward Saïd. With may be the exception of some older British colleagues, European and American historians have no colonialist afterthought, no prejudice against India at any time of its history. It is not either a problem of method: we share with our Indian colleagues the same methodology and the same conception of history. We share also with most of them the same ideology: the same wishing for social and gender equality, a common conception of human rights. It is a problem of resources and agenda.

Since 1947, Indian historians have almost no access to discoveries made outside their country, in Pakistan for obvious political reasons, in Afghanistan and Central Asia, elsewhere also for lack of funding. Indian Universities usually buy only Indian books, and libraries lack good librarians. Indian scholars have to go abroad to find most of the relevant literature, often written in languages seldom taught in India like Russian or French (our German colleagues usually write in English). Young Indian scholars cannot attend the many international conferences held in Europe or in the States for priority is given to seniority in the choice of Indian subsidized envoys.

Moreover, philology is no more fashionable in India and does not bring scholars any resource nor even prestige. Our Indian colleagues, who did so much for recovering and publishing Indian inscriptions and manuscripts, took almost no part in the deciphering and interpretation of the many inscriptions and manuscripts brought to light in Pakistan and Afghanistan for 20 years. The handful of European, American and Japanese scholars engaged in publishing these documents would be happy to collaborate with them, be it only for assessing the import of the new discoveries. But till now no young Indian scholar seems willing to follow in the steps of those great scholars active after the partition, some of them born or brought up in today Pakistan: D.C. Sircar, B.N.
Mukherjee, Lokesh Chandra, R. Thapar.

The agenda is also different. Indian historians have a national agenda. They are writing in their country about their country for their country. Japanese scholars, to whom we owe very important contributions to the history of Ancient India, most often have only a Buddhist agenda: few of them specialize in other fields. American and European scholars, when not converted to Hinduism or Buddhism, have no agenda. They study India with much sympathy, they often devote their whole life to it, but they often came to indology by accident. They could as well have specialized in Japanese studies or Chinese philology or Italian paintings. They are not impressed by the present political borders. With some exceptions, they do not take part into the Indian or Pakistani political turmoil. They are concerned with India because of its achievements, past and present; because it contributed so much to the progress of human mind; because a comparison between India and their own country helps to curb their own pride and nationalism; in short because India is part of mankind. And they may think, too optimistically maybe, that they are working for a time when borders should disappear, as in today Europe, when problems should be settled peacefully, when politics should be a contest of ideas, not a contest of strength and stone-pelting. They are following in the steps of many Indians, some of them known the world over for their contribution to peace and progress: Gautama Śākyamuni, Mahāvīra, Aśoka, Jawaharlal Nehru, many others. All of them, all of us I hope, would say like Terence: *homo sum, humani a me nihil alienum puto.*

Amsterdam, November 20th, 2009

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