Protestants, Orientalists, and Brāhmaṇas
Reconstructing Indian Social History

BY RICHARD W. LARIVIERE

1994 GONDA LECTURE
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Second Gonda lecture, held on 4 November 1994 on the premises of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences
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ROYAL NETHERLANDS ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Amsterdam, 1995
Today I want to look at criticisms of Sanskrit philology. This seems an appropriate topic for a lecture series named for Jan Gonda, one of the greatest philologists ever to study the Indian tradition. I want to look at criticisms of what we are doing when we engage in the enterprise of studying ancient Indian literature. Specifically, I want to look at the challenges and criticisms that have been leveled against philologists who have chosen to study India. I want to look at three important types of criticism. I will use a sort of short-hand means of referring to these three types of criticism: I will call these criticisms the Orientalist criticism, the Essentialist criticism, and the Distortionist criticism.

The first criticism I will call the Orientalist criticism. It has its origin in the landmark work of Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, but that book has spawned an entire mini-industry all its own. I want to talk about the charge that Europeans (and I include Americans under this rubric) have in some sense ‘created’ the India that they study. That this ‘created India’ has no basis in reality, and has been created to serve a constellation of interests all of which benefit Europeans and are inimical to the Indians, themselves.

The second criticism I will call the Essentialist criticism. It is articulated, for example, by Ronald Inden in his book *Imagining India*. It is the one that says that what we have done with our knowledge of ancient India is create ‘essences’ of India and Indian society. In doing so, we have again denied the reality of what India was and is, and created a manageable but grossly distorted view of India. In creating these essences we have also denied Indians agency in their own history. We have denied them the ability to shape their own destiny.

The third criticism that I want to address is what I call the Distortionist criticism. This is the charge that ideas found in Indian culture are taken out of their context and used for nefarious purposes elsewhere. This criticism has been brought by Sheldon Pollock in an article entitled ‘Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj.’

My point today is that each of these criticisms can be met effectively if we return to the philological techniques and values that have been exhibited with such consistency in the study of Greek and Latin classics, and that were once

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an important part of Sanskrit philology, but seem, in recent years, to have fallen out of favor.

In 1978 Edward Said published his book, Orientalism. In this book Said accused the European intellectual community of creating a basically false knowledge of the Arab world. This volume focused on the middle east, but its ideas were quickly transferred to other world areas. It has received during the past sixteen years its own share of criticism, not least that this book does to orientalists precisely what it accuses orientalists of doing to those cultures they study – over-generalizing, over-simplifying, and thus misrepresenting what those scholars were attempting to do.²

In spite of a good deal of criticism, the core of Said’s ideas still finds great currency among scholars of India. We are told, for example, that orientalists used philology to reaffirm European cultural and political dominance over Indians.³ They did this in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, according to this view, by discovering an original moment of Indian cultural history – Vedic India – and using it as a sort of core explanation for all of India’s subsequent history.⁴

This criticism is responsible for endowing the term ‘orientalist’ with all manner of malicious cultural imperialism. The most basic charge that these critics lay at the feet of the orientalist is that scholars have effectively denied the Oriental his (let alone her) history. The orientalist scholar has taken it upon himself

⁴ An extremely interesting and useful perspective on this period of Indological research may be found in Albrecht Wezler’s article ‘Towards a Reconstruction of Indian Cultural History: Observations and Reflections on 18th and 19th Century Indology,’ in Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik 18 (1993) 305–329.
to write the history of these peoples, and then to impose that history on the
Orientals. In the case of India, nineteenth century British historians drew on
the early work of philologists and other scholars and created an Indian history
that served the needs of the colonial state. This history was then taught to the
colonial subjects as well as the colonial masters, and became the 'standard' his­
tory. The 'real' history of India is only now being written, of course, now that
we are liberated from the fetters of colonialism — by scholars freed of their mis­
takes by Said's critique.

In summary of the Orientalist criticism, I would say that the primary objection
is that the history of ancient India is inadequate. That what we know about In­
dia is predicated on an almost willfully incomplete view of the record of Indian
history. Sometimes this willfully incomplete record was produced to deliber­
ately serve the interests of colonialism, and in other cases it was not intended
to be so used, but it was nevertheless used for those purposes.

The whole phenomenon of colonialism strikes us as strange today: semi-pri­
vate corporations like the Dutch or British East India Companies raising private
armies and boldly taking on the governance of other peoples half a world away
seems odd and anachronistic. To study how this was done and its effects on co­
lonized people is discomfiting. We may no longer feel the sense of manifest des­
tiny, of racial or cultural superiority that is necessary to engage in this kind of
colonialism, and to find evidence that one's (nearly immediate) predecessors be­
lieved themselves to be so superior is alarming. We know that this was wrong,
we decry it, and then we are beset with a terrible anxiety: is there any vestige
of this sense of superiority lingering in ourselves? If so, we tell ourselves, we
must expunge it. We are able to find these vestiges by 'critiquing' our methods
of producing and handling knowledge. This kind of critique is, of course, a va­
luable corrective from time to time. It is always helpful to be as fully aware of
what we are doing as we possibly can be. There is a danger, however, that this
sort of self-examination can become an intellectual industry all its own. It can
become pathological. I will come back to this danger in a moment.

The second major criticism, the Essentialist criticism, is in some sense a refine­
ment of the Orientalist criticism. According to this line of criticism, what we
have done as Sanskritists is to take the evidence of Sanskrit texts atemporally
and attempt to make a timeless, uniform system of thought that was immune
from the normal vicissitudes of politics, personality, and human appetites. It
became, according to this line of criticism, possible to describe 'an' India, 'an' Indian mind, etc., thus creating an essential India, which when understood and thus mastered, made it possible to 'understand' each and every phenomenon of India according to these essentialist categories.

This criticism is accompanied by a further objection that creating and imposing these categories denies the Indians any say in their own history. Not only does this deny the Indians a say in the writing of their own history, but it denies the Indians any significant role in the making of their own history! We think we know what the essence of Indian thought and culture is from Vedic times onward, and so, what Indians do during all that and subsequent periods can only be in conformity with this essence. Anything not in conformity with this essence is denied to exist.

In this Essentialist criticism, Sanskrit scholarship is looked upon as particularly culpable since it has tended to view the entire corpus of Sanskrit literature— all 3500 years of it— as barely changing in its depiction of religion, political configuration, and social organization. The Essentialist criticism states that the focus on religious texts in Sanskrit philology has tended to create the impression that Indians are 'spiritual' and that political and social complexities are lost in the uniformity that is found in the texts.

The third type of criticism, what I call the Distortionist criticism, calls Sanskrit philology to task for taking Indian ideas out of context and using them in ways that they were never intended. The study of Sanskrit, we are told by these critics, has been said to be in some measure responsible for the dehumanization of Jews, gypsies and others in Nazi Germany. This was done by contributing significantly to the quest for an Aryan identity among Germans. In addition to this fairly extravagant claim, the Distortionist school of criticism claims that philologists have tended only to use western categories when studying things like literature. It is in this category of criticism that I would include discussions of power.


Dharwadkar, op. cit. 158–185.
Power has become for some of these critics the single issue of focus. Power is the idea: it sets the agenda and determines the questions that must be asked. It has even been stated that the fundamental question of the human sciences is not their ‘truth,’ but their relationship to power. In ancient India, questions of power focus on the relationships between the classes of society. We are urged to interpret the texts from ancient India in such a way as to highlight the disparities of power, to highlight the violence and the abuses that result from those disparities. This is what is important, we are told, in the study of ancient India. It is important, because we must provide this sort of ‘enabling critique’ of the Indian tradition so that we can demonstrate solidarity with these historically oppressed classes and enable their contemporary heirs to finally become empowered themselves.

Each of these three types of criticism has some degree of merit. One might quibble with the extravagance of some of the criticisms or with the style and self-righteous tone of others, but in the end they must be taken seriously and answered seriously. In my view there is a fairly straightforward answer to most of these criticisms of Sanskrit studies: it is that in most cases where there is merit to the criticisms, it is due to the fact that we have strayed from the sort of hard-core, philological work that is necessary to reconstruct what ancient Indian society must have been like.

The criticisms of Sanskrit philology apply to work in all genres of literature. In my reply to these criticisms, however, I want to focus on one area that I know better than any other – the study of dharmaśāstras. I choose this literature not only because it is the literature I study most, but because it is the literature that is most central to the social, political, and intellectual issues raised by the three criticisms outlined previously. Let me get directly to the point: it is my view that we have for too long been attempting to reconstruct Indian social history using dharmaśāstras without having first examined these texts properly. That is, without having critically edited the texts, without having made every effort to determine the history of each text, we have been trying to use these texts to reconstruct history in classical India. What is more, we have been ignoring this problem for so long that we no longer even see it as a problem.

Joan Scott cited by Pollock, op. cit., at 114.
Let me give you an example. There is no text that is more important for the reconstruction of Indian social history than that of the Manusmṛti. It is the most important of the metrical smṛtis from the standpoint of its wide acceptance geographically and chronologically. Yet, in spite of the fact that this text was the first one translated into English (by Sir William Jones in 1794) and that translation not only served as an important foundation for British jurisprudence, but also had a great impact on European notions of India, this text has never been properly edited. Every edition is either based on a single manuscript corrected at will by an ‘editor’ or a random collection of manuscripts similarly corrected by an ‘editor.’ This text – so carelessly constituted – has been translated many, many times into French, German, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Urdu, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Hungarian, Chinese, Japanese, Polish, and Russian. Indeed, Manu has been subject to more editions and translations than any other Sanskrit legal text, and possibly any other Sanskrit text with the exception of the Bhagavadgītā. Yet none of these translations has been based on a scientifically constituted edition.

We seem not even to notice that this might be a problem. In the latest English translation, published by Penguin (1991), Wendy Doniger, my predecessor in this lecture series, states that she did not attempt to edit the text. She based her translation on J.H. Dave’s ‘edition.’ She says that where necessary she has supplemented this edition with readings from V.N. Mandlik’s edition published in 1886. What is striking is that Doniger does not seem to have noticed that Dave’s edition is largely an unacknowledged reprint of Mandlik’s edition, set in new type, with typographical errors intact.

This ‘new’ translation uncritically relies on a text published more than a century ago. ‘There are relatively few seriously disputed readings,’ claims Doniger, ‘and where such do occur, or where there are misreadings or even typographical errors in Dave, the fact that the many commentaries cite the verses makes it

9 Dave adds two commentaries not found in Mandlik, but even here, he has apparently taken without acknowledgement the work of others. Bhāruci’s commentary, it appears, is lifted without acknowledgement from the edition by J.D.M. Derrett, op. cit.. Dave never says in his volumes what evidence he used to constitute the text he printed.
easy to ascertain the correct reading.' (p. LXXI)). In fact there are myriad textual problems in Manu. Whole passages are in dispute.\(^{10}\)

Until we have a critical edition of Manu we will be condemned to treating this pivotal text as an ‘essence.’ We are condemned to dealing with it without knowing what we can about its history, about its transmission, about its career in various regions and moments in India. We are forced to deal with this text in just the manner condemned by the Essentialists in their criticisms.

It might be reasonably asked what one could expect to learn from critically editing such texts as the Manusmṛti or Gautamadharmaśāstra or any of the many other texts that have never been edited. First and foremost, it is the only hope we have of ever being able to establish anything like a reliable chronology of these texts. Chronology is the first step in giving back to these texts a context. This is essential if we hope to ever be able to speak of the changes in Indian society over time.

Let us look at just one issue relating to the chronology of these texts. P.V. Kane,\(^{11}\) K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar,\(^{12}\) Johan Jakob Meyer,\(^{13}\) and many others look to the treatment of ordeals in the dharmaśāstra for help in establishing their chronology. Other scholars like Shivaji Singh\(^{14}\) see in the pattern of the administration of ordeals subtle evidence for sociological shifts and evolution. In short, ordeals have been important in the rough and uncertain business of trying to establish chronologies for dharmaśāstras. The general argument goes like this. Texts like the dharmaśāstras started out as cursory summaries of rules and topics of dharma. As the literature develops (and as society becomes more complex) the general treatments of earlier texts are elaborated upon and more and

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\(^{12}\) Introduction to Brhaspatsmṛti (Reconstructed), Gaekwad’s Oriental Series, Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1941, pp. 110–115.

\(^{13}\) Über das Wesen der Altindischen Rechtsschriften, p. 106ff.

more detail is provided. In the case of ordeals, the earliest texts simply mention the topic by speaking of two ordeals, namely those of fire and water. Later texts add other ordeals and more detailed treatment of them. The Manusmṛti mentions only two ordeals, fire and water (8.114-116). The Yājñavalkyasmṛti mentions five – fire, water, balance, poison, and holy water (2.95-116). Jolly’s Nāradasmṛti treats seven ordeals, the previously mentioned five plus the rice and the hot gold ordeals (1.247-348 in Jolly’s edition). This, it is argued by most writers who have treated the subject of relative chronologies, is evidence to support the chronology Manu, Yājñavalkya, Nārada, the reason being that the greater the detail of treatment of a particular topic in a text, the later that text must be. In the case of ordeals we have not only a greater number of ordeals but also more detail about the administration of each ordeal in each subsequent mūlasmṛti: Manu has three verses, Yājñavalkya has twenty-two verses, and Nārada has one hundred and two. Yet this conclusion, which is based on Jolly’s edition of Nārada, is not supported by my critical edition of the text. In the earliest Nāradasmṛti – which critical editing discovered – there were only two ordeals, fire and water, and only five verses on this subject (1.218-222). This would upset the traditional chronology and change it to Manu, Nārada, and, last, Yājñavalkya. This would be an important step forward in our efforts to contextualize these works by establishing their relative chronologies. There is one enormous problem here, however: the only dharmashastra that has been critically edited is the Nāradasmṛti. Without the careful scrutiny of the surviving manuscript evidence of all the other dharmashastras, that is, without critically editing them, we cannot proceed with this question of relative chronologies.

Similar problems are encountered in every area where we attempt to make statements about the evolution of society and social concerns in classical India. If we look to the texts for evidence of such evolution, we may find the evidence, but we have no way of placing it in any kind of context. Evidence without context is nearly useless and most often misleading.

Now, there are those who would state that to rely on these texts for evidence of Indian social norms is to buy into brahminical distortion and deliberate deception. These texts were written by brāhmaṇas for themselves and other elites to read. The intent of these texts is to justify the disproportionate advantages of the brāhmaṇas. Their obvious bias in favor of brāhmaṇas, even the nature of these texts as texts – written in Sanskrit, transmitted either orally from elite
to elite, or in writing accessible only to the elite — should eliminate these texts from consideration as reflections of Indian society. The Distortionist criticism would say that these texts represent the entrenched interests of an oppressive elite. They would say that the very production of this literature is a manifestation of power, and the transmission of the literature by scholars is to contribute to that expression of power.

My response to these criticisms is that the sort of scientific, detailed philological study necessary to prepare critical editions is just the sort of work that is required to find the voice of subalterns, i.e. those elements of society who were not able to preserve their concerns and values as well as the brāhmaṇas. Unfortunately, we do not have from classical India any texts that survive which would present a view of society from the bottom up instead of the brāhmaṇa view from the top down. We must scrutinize the data that we have for traces of the voices and concerns of the subalterns. Admittedly this isn’t the easiest thing to find in many cases, but it is there. Take, for example, the case of matrimonial remedies available for women trapped in marriages that are unsatisfactory. Here again, I would turn to the Nāradasmṛti for an instructive example. We find sprinkled throughout Indian literature references to women called punarbhū — ‘remarried women’. These were women who were somehow married twice. Now, anyone familiar with women’s issues in India in ancient or modern times knows the problems that the institution of marriage presents to women. Marriage is an important part of every person’s dharma. Without marriage life’s obligations cannot be fulfilled: rituals cannot be performed, children cannot be born, ancestors cannot be nurtured, the entire fabric of society is threatened by instability in marriages. When marriages went wrong, remedies were needed.

Most of the time the matrimonial remedies mentioned in the Sanskrit literature are remedies made available for men. Basically, men are allowed to take more than one wife so long as the first wife is in some way unsatisfactory (this usually means the failure to give birth to sons in a timely fashion — within 8, 10, or 11 years depending on one’s caste), and so long as the husband can support both wives. The saṃskāra of marriage is looked upon as permanent and eternal. One cannot undo a saṃskāra. One cannot (in classical India) declare a marriage null and void. It is necessary for a man to fulfill his religious and social obligations to marry a woman who will bear male children for him. But what about women? What remedies do they have if the husband turns out to be unsui-
table? After all, women, too, have obligations to fulfill, namely giving birth to sons. If the husband is not able to engender children or has one of a number of other disabilities that prevent a woman from fulfilling her dharma, then it turns out, there are remedies available to her.

Beginning with the Atharvaveda\textsuperscript{1} and sprinkled throughout Sanskrit literature there are tantalizing references to ‘remarried women.’ Since women are not supposed to be married more than once according to the dominant tradition, these references are very interesting. They are finally elucidated in the Nāradasmṛti. Here we find that when a man is found to be impotent in certain ways – and the texts are very graphic and detailed – then a woman should leave him and marry another man. In spite of the popularity and prestige of the Nāradasmṛti, the particular passages offering remedies to women in unsatisfactory marriages are never subsequently quoted in the tradition. They obviously did not meet with wide approval in the community responsible for the production of smṛti literature. What I think this means is that we have evidence recorded in the Nāradasmṛti of a practice that was not accepted in the orthodox community, but which was so widespread that the methodically juridical Nāradasmṛti discussed these practices. Here is an almost subterranean thread of information that clearly meets with disapproval from the brāhmaṇas judging from their refusal to elaborate it, but it also tells us something very valuable: that careful scrutiny of the texts can reveal genuine subaltern concerns and practices. We know that at some time, in some place, in classical India women were in the habit of remarrying. This fact is revealed to us in a text that is authored (in all likelihood) by the very brāhmaṇa class that frowned upon the practice. In spite of the bias in favor of this class, in spite of a clear agenda to aggrandize the place and status of this class in society, nevertheless, for reasons that we can only guess at, the interests and concerns of a ‘disenfranchised and largely powerless class, namely women, are addressed – however fleetingly or subtly.

Relying on texts written by elites may seem an odd way to pursue the history of subalterns. Indeed, my colleague Gregory Schopen, has taken his fellow Buddhist scholars to task for focusing almost exclusively on textual sources for the

history of Buddhism. He has called this the ‘Protestant presupposition.’ It is a tendency to rely on textual sources above all others in reconstructing the history of Indian Buddhism. He chastises them for undervaluing archeology, epigraphy, and other sources. His important suggestion that Buddhist scholars should not rely so heavily on textual sources because of their bias in depicting the sangha, could just as easily be applied to the study of the other traditions in India. To some extent, we are all guilty of this ‘Protestant presupposition’ that the written, textual source is the most reliable and the most meaningful source of information. With regard to reconstructing the social history of classical India, however, sources other than texts are sparse. The archeological record for social history is skimpy. The epigraphic record, while voluminous, is of negligible value for helping determine the shape and practice of everyday life in classical India. Unlike the history of the Buddhist sangha, we have no better source for reconstructing Indian social history than the texts of the brāhmaṇas. We are, for better or for worse, reduced to relying on texts almost exclusively for our information about Indian social history. To be sure, we need to be aware of the biases of the authors of these texts, of their agenda, and of our own biases and agendas, but we cannot ignore the largest repository of information on ancient India – Sanskrit texts.

In connection with the need for awareness of our own biases and agenda, I want to return to the danger that I mentioned earlier, the danger of pathological self-examination. It seems that every academic discipline goes through a period when its motives and its uses are questioned in a fundamental manner. Anthropology has just emerged from such a period. Anthropologists were unnerved when they realized that the old ethnologies that had given birth to the very discipline of anthropology were not as objective as they thought. Anthropologists realized that their very presence in the community they were studying was disruptive. They realized the fundamental dilemma: that their very attempt to observe and document what others were doing was distorting what others were doing. This was further compounded by the more pervasive problem of objectivity: the realization that there is no such thing as pure objectivity. If one’s very presence is distorting, and if it is not possible to write about others

objectively, then what is left to write about? There is really only one subject left: oneself. And so, anthropology went through a period of theoretical angst in which the only logical outcome, or so it seemed, was to report not what happened in the village during your stay, but what you thought about during your stay in the village. We had a shift from flawed ethnography to tiresome biography.

I look upon this degree of self-examination as pathological because it resulted in the deviation from an attempt to document the life of the village to an attempt to record a single scholar's response to this task. We were told that an attempt to record the life of a Trobriand Islander is doomed to be distorting and skewed because it is being done by someone other than a member of the Trobriand Island culture. This distance is unbridgeable, we are told, and the only way to get around this problem is to have the ethnography written by a Trobriand Islander. But what if no Trobriand Islander is inclined to write such an ethnography? Am I condemned never to know anything about Trobriand Islanders? I would rather know something about them—even if it had to come via the imperfect medium of an anthropologist writing an ethnography.

Our colleagues in literary studies have progressed even beyond this dilemma, however. We now know, thanks to the deconstructionists, that not only is objectivity impossible, it seems it is even impossible to convey intended meaning. It seems that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the writer and the reader as well. No matter what the writer intends when he writes, the reader will bring his separate set of experiences and understanding to the writer's text. This is truly pathological. This means that the very enterprise of writing is unlikely to convey the meaning intended by the writer. This is a view that I find truly tiresome (and for those of you who have attempted to read deconstructionist theory you know, at least, what the word tiresome means. The impenetrability of the writing about this theory has given rise to much derision on American campuses—my favorite is the story of the Boss of a Mafia family who decided he would study deconstructionist theory. As a result, he was eventually replaced as the Boss because instead of giving orders that no one could refuse, he found himself giving orders that no one could understand.)

So, how is philology a cure for these intellectual ailments? It is a cure because it is the fundament of our science. It is the foundation on which we must build. The texts are our best source of testimony about classical India. Even
though the vast majority of the surviving literature from classical India was written by males, by elites, by individuals with vested class interests, nevertheless, it is in many ways the only window that we have on classical Indian society. If we wish to know about classical Indian society, we must study these texts. But we must give these texts every opportunity to speak to us, to tell as much of their history as they are able to tell. This means that we must have reliable texts. For this there is no substitute for the tiresome, tedious, painstaking work of editing texts. It is only through the creation of edited texts that we can begin to place these texts in their proper context. But this is tiresome work. Unpleasant and unattractive. It is much easier and more enticing to begin to theorize, to make conclusions about classical Indian society without having to do this tedious work of editing texts.

Those of us who work in traditional philology may well be accused of distorting the texts we read because of the fact that we bring a late 20th century perspective to the task. This is unavoidable. Obviously, we cannot expect Indians of the tenth century AD to suddenly appear and explain their own work to us — the equivalent of insisting on the Trobriand Islander's own account. Our Indian colleagues are no less free of bias. For them, as for us, the past is a foreign country.

All of us who work in the humanities are engaged in an endless quest for answers to that most fundamental question, what does it mean to be human? The ways to ask this question, the sources of which we can ask this question, and the types of answers to it are endless. Those of us who find India fascinating choose to ask these questions of the Indian tradition. Those of us who are philologists choose to ask this question of long dead, but nevertheless insightful and still valuable thinkers of the Indian tradition. We are engaged in the preservation of their wisdom and their thoughts. It is always tempting to give a quick and impressionistic answer to complex questions, but it is also risky. The better the data we have the better our answers will be, and philology provides the data. In order to give the fullest possible voice to the views of classical Indians — of all social classes —, we must carefully and thoroughly edit their texts. If we do our job well, then the work that is done after that — interpreting these texts — will provide us with better answers to this timeless question. We can debate the meaning of the texts, we can debate our interpretations of the texts, we can reach conclusions and revise those conclusions, but through it all we must be
confident that the meaning, interpretation, and conclusions are based on the best reconstruction of the sources that we can achieve. It is here that philology renders its contribution. It is on such philology that Indological studies are built.
The Gonda lectures are organized every year by the J. Gonda Fund. The J. Gonda Fund was established in 1993 under the auspices of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and has the task of administering the inheritance bequeathed to the Academy by the Sanskritist and Indologist Professor J. Gonda.

Published in this series:
H.W. Bodewitz: J. Gonda, 14 April 1905-28 July 1991
W. Doniger: Masquerading Mothers and False Fathers in Ancient Indian Mythology, 1993 Gonda lecture