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978-1-107-63417-6 - The Content of Indian and Iranian Studies: An Inaugural  
Lecture Delivered on 2 May 1938

H. W. Bailey

Excerpt

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## THE CONTENT OF INDIAN AND IRANIAN STUDIES

Sanskrit as the title of a University Chair has something of simplicity to recommend it. But simplicity may be deceptive, and if we should insist upon interpreting rigorously the word Sanskrit in this title, that is, in the sense of the Indian word *samskr̥ta*, the learned language of India as regulated and refined by the grammarians, we should reach the paradoxical position that more than half of our present Sanskrit syllabus would be excluded. It was my purpose in proposing to give this lecture to indicate in the manner of a modest programme what is embraced in this wider study. For the same reason I have entitled this lecture not 'The Content of Sanskrit Studies', but 'The Content of Indian and Iranian Studies'. It is the study of a culture which has become two but was originally one, and of which

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the later developments came once again into close contact.

I may speak first of Indian studies. It is interesting to see how the countries to the west of India have come to a knowledge of things Indian. Within India itself Sanskrit and its allied literatures, though in the north checked to some extent by the Muhammadan incursions, were maintained without break from the earliest records. Outside India we see in the west that the Persians early interested themselves in this literature. Two famous collections of stories, the book of beast fables, the Sanskrit Pancatantra, which was known in a Persian translation in Persia in the sixth century under the Sasanian kings, and the book of the legend of the Bodhisattva, that is, the aspirant to Buddhist enlightenment, under the name of Barlaam and Joasaph, spread through Persia and Syria to the whole Islamic world and to other parts of Europe. One great student we know, the Muhammadan scholar, the Chorasmanian Al-Bairūnī, who lived from A.D. 973 to 1048. He stands out from his fellows. To secure solid results for his book on India, he made himself familiar with Sanskrit, then, as for many now,

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the language of learning in India. But there were among the Arabs and Persians no studies, no editions and no encyclopaedias gathering up Sanskrit learning in the original language. In Europe exact knowledge of Sanskrit came as something of a revelation in the eighteenth century. From that time its influence has spread till little in the humanities has been left unaffected. But at first books were hard to procure, and some reluctance had to be overcome, a reluctance, easily understood, to initiate foreigners into a sacred tradition. With this western knowledge we shall contrast the countries to the east of India. There during the early Christian centuries, Chinese and other scholars were assiduously and enthusiastically reading and translating Sanskrit.

It is pleasantly refreshing to observe the first contact of Europeans under the influence of their tradition of classical scholarship with this new matter of research. There was a keen appreciation of the literary treasures, as the enthusiastic welcome of Kālidāsa's drama *Śakuntalā* shows. The linguistic importance of the Sanskrit language was at once recognized. We observe how eagerly the scanty available texts were read, how

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for the first time the methods of classical research were applied to an Indian language. Editions of short texts were made, the story of Nala and Damayantī, and of Arjuna's journey to heaven. The philosophical didactic poem called the Bhagavadgītā was among the earlier publications. These texts were not in the oldest form of the Indian language, but they served nevertheless to point the way to the beginnings of comparative grammar. In this the elaborate analysis carried out centuries earlier by the Indian grammarians proved of great assistance. Meantime with a great enthusiasm the search for the oldest Indian literature was carried on. By 1863 Aufrecht had brought out the first complete edition of the Rigveda, the oldest and linguistically the most important text.

I need not delay long to-day over the content of Sanskrit literature. It will be familiar to all in the many histories of Sanskrit literature, which have been published in the past hundred years, in English, French, German and other languages. But I should here perhaps indicate briefly the course of this literary development. The oldest texts are the poetical Vedas, books held in

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particular honour, and the ancillary literature containing explanations of the ritual, philosophical speculations and legends. The four chief collections were named from the use to which their verses were put, the Rigveda, the book of hymns, the Yajurveda, the book of sacrificial formulae, the Sāmaveda, the book of chantings, and the Atharvaveda, the book of magical spells. The dates of these books unhappily for us did not interest the composers or the collectors or those who transmitted them. But the oldest parts are hardly likely to be later than about 1200 B.C. As to the contents, some of the poems of the Rigveda, which are wholly religious in character, read with remarkable freshness. That they should have been quoted later in books of rather wearisome theology is the fate of many a book deemed sacred. The collection of the Atharvaveda is full of the formulae of magic, of blessings and curses, and magical promises. It touches a side of life almost entirely different from the Rigveda. After the Vedas came the explanations, the Brāhmaṇas. But it requires an extraordinarily sympathetic mind to enjoy their contents. In striking contrast stand the philosophical treatises known

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under the name of Upaniṣads, which have been widely read and enjoyed. Law books follow, based on religious doctrines, then the political and ethical manuals. The grammarians stand apart. The grammars are treatises of high precision. One especial grammar, that of Pāṇini, whom an Indian tradition places in the fourth century B.C., cannot be passed over unnamed. It offers us an invaluable record of the language which was recognized to be standard in the north-west of India in his time. He was, however, not blind to other standards, as he shows by quoting at times, for our taste all too rarely, divergences of the language of the East. Epic poetry is represented for us in two great poems, the Mahābhārata, a huge disparate collection, repository of numerous legends and didactic admonitions, and the Rāmāyaṇa, simpler, less interpolated, the gracious story of Rāma and his stolen wife, a story beloved in India as in the lands which received Indian culture. Long eulogies of kings, the praśasti as they are called, are carved on the rocks, for the inscriptions of India are legion. Drama, lyrical and gnomic poetry flourished wonderfully. And I ought

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perhaps not to forget completely the modern use of Sanskrit. One reads, in a recent History of Sanskrit Literature from South India, for example, that the English paraphrase of the Persian Omar Khayyam, which we owe to Fitzgerald, has been rendered into Sanskrit which is 'superb'. In South India particularly, there has been very considerable activity in Sanskrit composition to the present day.

This Vedic and Sanskrit literature is vast enough in itself. But it is no longer possible to be content with Indian literature in these two forms of the Old Indian language. It has now long been recognized that without some knowledge of the later forms of the language, which we conveniently associate under the name Middle Indian (or Middle Indo-Aryan, to distinguish it from other non-Aryan languages of India), and the literatures preserved in them, only a distorted view of Indian culture and history can result. This later development of the Old Indian language is known to us in many different forms. Originally, and largely at all times, these distinctions were due to divergent provincial changes. The dialects can be particularly clearly

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traced in the earliest inscriptions, those of Aśoka in the third century B.C. The north-western, the western and the eastern dialects are easily recognized. Fragments of dramas have been found using this early type of Middle Indian, but it is in a slightly later form that we know most of the dialects, at a time when they were largely used in dramatic compositions, chiefly for inferior characters and women, sometimes indeed exclusively. Two large collections of Middle Indian texts owe their origin to the foundation of particular religions, those of the Jainas and the Buddhists. The older Jaina literature is preserved in two dialects, which we call Ardha-Māgadhī and Māhārāṣṭrī. The Buddhists used a variety of Middle Indian dialects. The most complete collection has reached us in a form of Western Indian and is now widely known under the name of Pali. Inscriptions are likewise found in a variety of dialects from the time of Aśoka onwards.

It will not be possible here to speak of the recent developments in the New Indian languages such as Sinhalese, Gujarati, Hindi, Panjabi, Marathi and Bengali. For linguistic study these languages are of great importance. Each



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too has developed its own literature, and one poem, the story of Rāma, in the Rāma-carita-mānasa of Tulasī-dāsa in the Awadhī language has had a great fortune. There are bright prospects for the future of these languages.

I should here intercalate a few words on the scripts used in recording this enormous literary output. One script, the recently discovered writing of the Indus Valley, does not concern us here. It is not used for the literature I have mentioned. But two other scripts have been in use. They have been designated by names from the Sanskrit books as the Kharoṣṭhī and the Brāhmī. The origin of the Kharoṣṭhī is known. It is a variety of the Aramaic alphabet of Syria. It was a script of North-western India and was carried thence to the Indian settlements of Central Asia beyond Khotan. It is known to us chiefly from documents and inscriptions, but a literature did at one time exist in it of which fragments have survived. The second script, the Brāhmī, whose origin is to some minds still undecided, is the script of all India in a great variety of modifications. It spread with Indian culture to the south-eastern lands as far as Cambodia.

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It has a home in the decorative script of Java. It went to Tibet, to Bactria and eastwards to Kashghar, Khotan, Kuci, Agni and the Turks. The Chinese Buddhists used it in China, and to the present day the script has been handed down in Buddhist connections in Japan. The variety of form is great but the system is one. For the expression of Indian sounds it has been phonetically excellent. For other peoples it required considerable modification and at least twenty-two new signs were ultimately invented in Central Asia. The Khotanese were satisfied to give new values to existing signs, producing thereby a somewhat cumbrous system, and the Turks tried both methods to increase its usefulness. Other scripts, such as the Arabic modification of the Aramaic script, which have been used in India need not detain us here.

I must now turn to consider Iranian studies. By the Iranian or Eranian, for the English spelling and pronunciation of the word is still unfixed, we refer to a group of languages and to a large literature, which belong to Persia and the lands adjacent to Persia to the north and east, to the regions beyond Khotan. Persian itself is one