Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn

Archives of Origins
Sanskrit, Philology, Anthropology
in 19th Century Germany

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Once, noting that one of his French colleagues or disciples had been guilty of a blunder, my mentor Armand Minard raised his arms to the sky and exclaimed, half-seriously, half-jokingly: “What will the Germans say!” A good Germanist himself, he pronounced German words slowly, with reverent delectation. This was around 1960, almost half a century after the end of the period covered by Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn’s book. To him, German science represented a kind of superego. This was more or less the case with all Indologists in his generation.

Like Louis Renou, Armand Minard was a professor at the Sorbonne and a director of studies in the philological and historical science section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. He taught Sanskrit as well as the comparative grammar of Indo-European languages. All these headings bear the mark of the German influence. Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn perfectly brings this to light: in France, the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes was created as a place where knowledge transmission would be an integral part of what is called research. *Ex cathedra* teaching was replaced by a system of seminars, inspired from long-proven practices in German universities. Masters and students would present and discuss the projects they had embarked on, which were supposed to be original works. The role of masters was to train students in the methods and techniques that would enable them to contribute to the production of new knowledge.

As regards philology and philological sciences, a major contribution of Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn is showing how the interest in Indian writings, and primarily Sanskrit texts, could give rise to their philology. Again, it was in Germany that things first took shape. This is a striking aspect of the “German passion” for India. The constant ambition of the first German Indologists was to apply the methods of Greek philology to Indian documents. In doing so, they were founders – and they have remained models. It was through their efforts to attain this goal that they acquired the reputation of impeccably scrupulous and erudite scholars. How can one edit texts, establish their accurate version and fully understand them, in order to translate them as faithfully as possible? Such work can only be achieved with the appropriate instruments, and these had yet to be created: grammar, dictionaries, and all kinds of repertoires. German Indologists decisively contributed to this gigantic undertaking. However, Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn clearly shows how German Indologists had to fight in order for Indian writings to be acknowledged as lending themselves to philology.

This aspect of her book directly falls within the province of German studies in that it concerns the intellectual history of Germany in the 19th century – movement of ideas, academic careers and institutions. Yet the issues evoked arose under diverse forms amongst Indologists of all countries. To what extent could the newly-formed Indian
philology produce a new form of humanism that would include the Indian heritage in the culture of mankind?

India was neither Greece nor the land of the Bible. Could it be featured alongside them? Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn has constantly had to go back to the question of the reason behind Indian studies. To the people that Indologists were addressing, the mere desire to get acquainted with the form of humanity that Indian civilisation represented would not have been enough. To satisfy the academic authorities, the erudite opinion, the student public that they had to attract – and even themselves – Indologists always had to justify their interest in India. This knowledge was useful to set up and strengthen other forms of knowledge, such as the comparative grammar of Indo-European languages, comparative mythology, the primitive stages of the human branch whence Indo-European races and ethnic groups derived, and even what we could call the dawn of mankind. In any case, in this justification system the value of ancient Indian writings was that they gave access to what had preceded them, making it possible to hypothetically reconstruct an original past.

In this nebula of interests, in this compulsive fervour concerning origins, one thing remained solid if approached with rigour and simplicity: the branch of linguistics that the comparative grammar of Indo-European languages represented. It could only take shape thanks to the discovery and systematic study of Sanskrit. Furthermore, it required that German scholars free themselves from the chiefly-Romantic notion that there was a special affinity between the German language, the German mind and the approximation of an Indo-European language and mind that Sanskrit and the Vedic myths and poetry were supposed to be. All in all, it became necessary to acknowledge that, although it ended up asserting itself in German-speaking countries, the expression *indogermanisch* was arbitrary and deceptive, and did not give a proper account of the situation it was supposed to refer to. For a while, this notion had challenged another doxa, more persistent and rooted in the German tradition: that of a privileged relationship between German and Greek, which were considered as the only two truly philosophical languages.

The “anthropological extension” of philology, to use Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn’s wording, represents a more uncertain domain, a field that is favourable to arbitrary speculation and the most aggressive ideological assertions. The “extension” towards “anthropology” was no more a German characteristic than the construction of comparative grammar. In Germany, however, the notion of an “Aryan” mythology and religion, as well as an “Aryan” people – even race – took on an especially harmful turn. It was received and used by a nationalist, anti-Semitic and racist movement of opinion that was developing – diversely expressed and with numerous variants – during the period studied by Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn. In that it is based on writings, archive documents and archaeological accounts, the history of religions pertains to general history and, in principle, should be able to conform with the scientific criteria of this discipline.

But in the 19th century, anthropology was a much vaguer notion – an interest in search of its subject and method. It would take time and much work before it
became obvious that a distinction had to be made between physical anthropology on the one hand, social and cultural anthropology on the other; before there was a critical questioning of the propensity to assess cultures according to some generally implicit hierarchy and consider the course of time as either progress or decline; before it was acknowledged that racism was a scientific asininity.

Today’s readers are relieved to note that Romantic Indomania and ideologies based on special affinity between Germany and India (envisaged only in its “Aryan” component) mostly spread and prevailed amongst the laymen rather than amongst academic scholars. Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn does not linger on this; it is not her intention. However, these outsiders did exist and, should one venture towards these non-professionals, one would note that they had a strange and powerful influence. Adopted by certain obscure esoteric cults, the swastika was adorned with the prestige of the venerable Indian swastika symbol. Mysteriously, immediately after World War One it became the emblem of the national-socialist party and then the Third Reich. To the Indians, this certainly has not gone unnoticed. In 1981, for instance, V.T. Rajshekar, the leader of the revolutionary movement called Dalit (meaning ‘oppressed’ and adopted by the Untouchables to refer to themselves), published a virulent diatribe against the Brahmans, saying that for millennia they imposed their harsh domination on Indian society. To him, this domination was in essence a form of racism, and not only was “Brahmanism” similar to fascist dictatorships and Nazism, it was also the direct inspirational source for these ideologies. It was with the Brahmans that European Indologists, especially German and British ones, acquired their views of India, and it was from them that they drew the ideas that were going to be those of Nazism. The adventure of the swastika, Rajshekar added, was precisely an indication of this influence.\(^1\) All this goes beyond the time frame and domain set by Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, who precisely warns us against the temptation of retrospective readings: what makes sense in a given situation is not necessarily a forewarning sign of what is to come.

This book by Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn is valuable for the large amount of data it puts into order, as well as the light it sheds on 19th-century German universities and the debates and affects that arose from the apparition of India on the horizon of scholars. Its worth also extents to serving as a model and basis for further studies – some of them, let us hope, could be achieved by Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn herself – on closely related domains: the India of philosophers (Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche), or India viewed by philologist-philosophers through its own philosophical production (the works of P. Deussen and G. Thibaut come to mind). Lastly, Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn puts us in a position to approach more safely the periods that follow the one she has studied. What became of German Indology under the Third Reich? Did Indologists welcome the regime more clearly and spontaneously than specialists in other disciplines, for instance Hellenists?

What happened in the second half of the 20th century? Indology progressively grew global. Even though there were strong academic traditions in each European culture,

it must be noted that centres of Indian studies multiplied and scattered. As was the case with so many other scientific domains, a large number of Indologists fled from 3rd Reich-dominated Europe or left crumbling, post-war Germany. With decolonization, Indology extended worldwide, even including Indology in India: inspired by Western methods – while criticising the colonial ideology – philological and historical research was added to or took the place of the traditional knowledge of the pandits. The link between the study of Sanskrit and the comparative grammar of Indo-European languages slackened. With the discovery of the Hittite language, the notion of “Indo-European” became more complex and Sanskrit data no longer occupied a privileged position in the hypothetical reconstruction of this ensemble. Last and not least, although the Indian sub-continent was increasingly perceived as an infinitely diverse linguistic and cultural area, scholars strove to highlight common characteristics. There was Northern and Southern India; Indo-Aryan-speaking India and Dravidian-speaking India (to mention only two components amongst many); however, the underlying millenarian network of interactions became apparent. In the study of India, the passion for organisation succeeded the passion for origins brilliantly put into perspective by Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn.

Charles Malamoud