Chapter I

Racialising the ‘Other’:
European Indology and the Transformation of History
India has engaged the imagination of Europe and been represented in its fantasies since nearly as far back as any documentary history goes. The turning point in the fantastic representations of India came after Vasco da Gama’s serendipitous arrival on the shores of Calicut in 1498. Till then, India and Indians held a place of unfounded imaginings and conjectures of itinerant travellers and other second-hand information. After the discovery of the new world, India came to occupy a real space in the expansionist aspirations of Europe. India became relevant in terms of trade, and was perceived as politically organised and holding fresh prospects for the world that Europe wanted to create.

The entire range of representations of India from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries covers writings by itinerant travellers, missionaries, scholars trained in languages and history, and colonial administrators. There were efforts right across Europe to document the people on the other shore, and there are accounts of early Dutch, Portuguese, French and Italian travellers, missionaries and scholars on the perceived realities of the Indian subcontinent. Trade related documents naturally concentrated on the unfolding of European politics in India, rather than on the social and political realities of the people they were trading with. Travellers’ accounts invariably constructed a reality that is coloured by their own religious and political convictions and document all things curious to their eyes, but do not necessarily cover a historical past.¹ The missionaries’ efforts on the other hand, were somewhat more exhaustive, and fell within a tradition of religious – non-secular – scholarship. In their thoroughness, they studied local languages and at times were the first ones to ever write the grammars of the languages they learnt. For instance, grammars of Konkani and Tamil were written roughly as early as in the latter half of the sixteenth

¹ Some recent work in the area contends that the earlier writers, particularly between 1500-1800 were not impelled by the need to define India by a single category – like that of caste – and thus give a more open and realistic picture of Indian societal organisation. See Gita Dharampal-Frick, “Shifting Categories in the Discourse on Caste: Some Historical Observations” in Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron, eds, “Representing Hinduism: The Constructions of Religious Traditions and National Identity”, Sage Publications, Delhi, 1995, pp 82-100. This essay argues that rereading this early documentation for its relatively less systematic depiction of reality helps explain how later European observers “aimed to derive knowledge of and impose control over the diffuse reality.” P. 97.
century. Missionaries maintained correspondences about their experiences and the practices of the people whose languages they were learning, with the church in Rome, which preserved such correspondence. Religious texts were being accessed and translated. Figures like Roberto Nobili (1577-1656) represent a different phase in missionary activity, which became an increasingly complex issue and produced work that was proportionately self-reflexive. Nobili, in his extensive writings on his work in Tamil Nadu, engages with the questions regarding the assimilation of Christian practices into traditions already deeply rooted in the lives of the people missionaries like him sought to convert. Sanskrit grammars were also written, the supposedly earliest by Heinrich Roth, and a later grammar by Johann Ernst Hanxleden, both German Jesuits. While neither of these grammars was published, they formed a basis for work in the area of research on Sanskrit grammar by Paulinus. The French Jesuit, Jean-Francois Pons is said to have written a comprehensive overview of Sanskrit philosophical and scientific literature in a letter to a fellow missionary, Pere du Halde. It is also an analytical and critical document, which takes issue with philosophical doctrines of the Sanskrit texts. Instances of such scholarship are abundant, and they amply demonstrate the nature of missionary endeavour, and how it really laid the foundation of the formal and institutionalised study of Indian themes, albeit with an entirely different framework, and with different concerns, in terms of understanding a new religious universe. This body of scholarship has had varying meanings in the hands of diverse scholars – depending on the perspective from which it was used. Later work that proceeded in this tradition was classified as ‘Orientalist’ even as it was used for a reinterpretation of Indian social organisation with caste as its basic

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3 Parts of the Jnaneshwari were translated into Portuguese by Manuel d’Oliveira an Indian convert. Halbfass, p 37.

4 Nobili’s treatises in Latin deal with the role of the caste system and the position of Brahmins within it, traditional sciences and prevalent social and religious customs. He also goes over religious literature with which he has become familiar. He offers a defense of Brahminical teachings as secular, and argues that missionaries should adapt to social customs in a manner, which enables them to integrate their teachings into the conceptual universe of those they were preaching to.

5 Kejariwal, p 15.
organising principle. Modern scholars are working with this material to bring to light the processes by which such essentialisation happened.⁶

Scholarship with a Purpose: The British Sanskritists and Colonialism

Trade and the quest for new converts were the earliest driving forces behind missionary efforts at documentation and research to describe what they found. This very drive takes on a different connotation and justification after the British conquest of Bengal. Scholarship on India was also determined by the axis of imperial rule — and the transition from the company Raj, to comprehensive administrative control. It is this specific feature of direct conquest and administrative control that differentiated Britain’s conceptualisation of the Indian subject, and marked it off from the continental traditions of the philosophy of history etc.⁷

The very fact of conquest brought the British face to face with the question of classifying their Indian subjects on a world scale, and part of the task was also to define the relationship between the two. In itself, it presented for British anthropology a contradiction — India was an evolved society, with complex forms of social organisation, and therefore not much of a candidate for simple classification as the opposite of all that Europe stood for. According to Trautmann, the central project of British anthropology was “to achieve classifications of human variety consistent with the master idea of the opposition of dark-skinned savage and the fair-skinned civilised European. To this project, India was an enigma deepened in the course of the nineteenth century, bursting into scholarly warfare over the competing claims of language and complexion as the foundation of ethnological classification. India, thus was the site of a Methodenstreit among Victorian Britons who were in the process of creating a ‘science of man’ that concerned the respective claims of language and

⁷ This is not to argue that the difference between the British and the continental Orientalist tradition was a simple one of colonial governance and philosophical speculation respectively. Rather, that orientalism was mediated differently through the fact of actual governance. The question of the role played by continental traditions remains for contemporary scholarship. Cf. Kamakshi P. Murti, India: The Seductive and Seduced “Other” of German Orientalism, Contributions in Comparative Colonial Studies, Number 39, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, London. 2001.
physique”.* In that context, colonial government provided ample opportunity to involve administrators investigating the history, social practices and the institutions of the Indian people. Administrators like Warren Hastings were crucial to the patronage and institutionalisation of such scholarship. Clearly, this, in itself was no merely scholarly exercise; it was meant to equip the colonial state on matters of characterisation and classification of a people. However, even as a tool of governance, the ideological and discursive constitution of a colonial subject had to be consistent with the pre-existing paradigms of ethnological classification in Britain. The perspective on governance naturally was guided by a conviction that even if the colonial state equipped itself with some of the best personnel in its highest rungs, it was important that legal and other institutional codes be comprehensible to the people that were being governed. Hastings says in a letter to Nathaniel Smith regarding Charles Wilkins’ translation of the Bhagavatgeeta,

“Every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state: it is the gain of humanity: in the specific instance which I have stated, it attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our own countrymen the sense and obligation of benevolence.”

The Early Phase: Ethnographic Concerns

The relationship between conquest and representation of India do not have the setting up of revenue collection and of the judiciary as their basis. The relationship had other dimensions, which were more subtly represented by the ethnographic construction of India, shaped by wider political and historical concerns. The idea that there was a linguistic brotherhood between the ancient languages of Europe and India, and that understanding the religious precepts that texts in Sanskrit articulated would be vital to Europe’s self-definition, are at the core of the development of Indology. The same concerns are drawn out to divergent conclusions within the discipline as

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well as in wider applications within anthropology. It is therefore important to look at the British and continental traditions separately, keeping in mind not merely the historical fact of colonisation, but also that approaches to Indology were dictated by the philosophical traditions and social movements that were specific to both British and continental traditions.

In the course of the transition of the British presence into full-fledged colonial state machinery, events like the founding of the Asiatic Society, were landmark developments. Leading up to the institutionalisation of Indology, were figures like John Zephaniah Holwell who served the East India Company in Bengal, and Alexander Dow who started out as a sailor, and was for a time Colonel in the Company’s Bengal Army. They are instances of people in the services of the company publishing treatises on Hinduism, and in the latter’s case, the History of Hindostan, published in 1768. Texts produced by these and others like them represent the rudiments of theoretical concerns, which shaped the future and the politics of Indology, specifically as a matter with divergent concerns for the colonial state as against for the philosophical and methodological concerns of the continent. Holwell and Dow were significant because their understanding and interpretation of the history of the subcontinent and of Hinduism suggests that it is an essential body of knowledge, which makes many Christian doctrines comprehensible. In fact they appear to have reworked the texts they had access to in order to fit the slots of Christian theology. These texts had come a long way from assumptions, which treated modes of worship found among the Indian people as a mark of idolatry. The inevitable paradox in the works of the missionaries of justifying the need for conversion by demonstrating inadequacies and symptoms of misled faith in the religions of the potential converts, and at the same time making their doctrines and vocabularies comprehensible to the local people with whom they were working, made for an interesting engagement with their experiences with the Hinduism they

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10 See Peter Pels, Oscar Salemink, eds, Introduction in Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp 1-52. This introduction provides a very useful overview of the issues relating to the role of anthropology within colonialism and its critique. It tries to address the question of the role of direct colonial instrumentality, and that of ‘discursive’ interventions – the case of Britain and Germany. Pels and Salemink try “to emancipate some of the colonial locations of ethnography from the disciplinary perspective on the history of anthropology.” Pp 1-52.

encountered. Missionaries in China had similar experiences in relation to Confucianism, where they had been compelled to defend certain Confucian practices. In southern India, as in many other cases, the propagation of Christianity was a matter of assimilation of its message into the already entrenched and highly defined social structure and its hierarchies. It is therefore no surprise that missionary activity, while on the one hand asserting that it carried a message of universality, made peace with highly unequal social practices. Some of these situations did cause uproar. The formulations of a common heritage that were volunteered by missionaries were under much scrutiny, and

“the argument that all the people of the earth had some intimations of divine truth through God-given reason and the contemplation of a rational universe was a particularly vulnerable one. If ‘reason’ was to be interpreted in a secular rather than a Christian way, as a fact of human nature, not as a gift of God, any similarity between Hinduism and the Jewish or Christian faiths could become a source of embarrassment for Christians. It could be argued that these similarities merely showed that it was ‘natural’ for all men to believe in a single supreme being, in the immortality of the soul, and in certain basic principles of morality. Instead of being the model of which other beliefs were pale imitations, Christianity could be portrayed as just one offshoot of a universal ‘natural’ religion, any dogmas beyond these simple truths being excrescences and later accumulations.”

For critics of Christianity and its doctrines, the suggestion that while there were common elements between Christianity and Confucianism, or Hinduism, that these religions were actually quite older than Christianity would have been a victory. It would prove that it was actually a derivative of older religions rather than vice versa.

Against this backdrop of theological considerations of much political-historical relevance, the work of Holwell and Dow had strong deistic inclinations. The work of both these men tended to argue that completely independent of Jewish or Christian contact, there existed a religion founded on monotheism, and that instances of polytheism, which had been interpreted by earlier writers and critics of the Hindu religion as a mark of idolatry, was in fact only figurative. Dow states in his 'A dissertation concerning the Customs, Manners, Language, Religion and Philosophy of the Hindoos',

"we find that the Bralunins, contrary to the ideas formed of them in the west, invariably believe in the unity, eternity, omniscience and omnipotence of God: that the polytheism of which they have been accused, is no more than a symbolical worship of the divine attributes, which they divide into three principle classes. Under the name of Brimha, they worship the wisdom and creative power of God; under the appellation of Bishen, his providential and preserving quality; and under that of Shibah, that attribute which tends to destroy."13

While both writers – again, like many others – came to their own individual conclusions regarding the fundamental nature of religions in general and more specifically the position of Christianity in the now widening panorama of world religions, their work established an arena of debate. Voltaire, for instance, took in their work completely, and launched a fresh critique against the practices of Christianity. More importantly, it brought the issue of chronology to the centre of Indological investigations. It was an issue that would be able to shift the debate about the antiquity of peoples, religions and histories significantly in favour of one or the other.14

William Jones’ work is a landmark development in the sense that it reins in some of the sprawling contestations about the place of Hinduism (and other religions) and therefore implicitly of Christianity in world history, and introduces the enduring idea of the Indo-European. 15 He makes an arrival on the scene with a very clear perspective on the role of Mosaic history. He says in his ‘On the Chronology of the Hindus’,

"attached to no system, and as much disposed to reject the Mosaick history, if it be proved erroneous, as to believe it, if it be confirmed by sound reasoning, from indubitable evidence, I propose to lay before you a concise account of Indian chronology extracted from Sanscrit books, or collected from conversations with Pandits, and to subjoin a few remarks on their system, without attempting to decide a question, which I shall venture to start, ‘whether it is not in fact the same with our own, but embellished and obscured by the fancy of their poets and the riddles of their astronomers’".

And in his ‘On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India’, he says even more emphatically, about the uses of examining the distant history of mankind,

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14 See Trautmann, pp 68-73 for an interesting account of the conclusions that Holwcll and Dow arrived at about the central precepts of Hinduism and the fact also that they thought that many Christian doctrines were fully articulated in the thought of the “Hindoos”.
15 Jones arrived at a study of Sanskrit through Persian and Arabic. Cf. O. P. Kejariwal.
“they may even be of solid importance in an age, when some intelligent and virtuous persons are inclined to doubt the authenticity of the accounts delivered by Moses, concerning the primitive world; since no modes or sources of reasoning can be unimportant, which have a tendency to remove doubts. Either the first eleven chapters of Genesis all due allowances being made for a figurative Eastern style, are true, or the whole fabric of our national religion is false; a conclusion, which none of us, I trust, would wish to be drawn. [b]ut it is not the truth of our national religion, as such, that I have at heart: it is the truth itself; and, if any cool unbiased reasoner will clearly convince me, that Moses drew his narrative through Egyptian conduits from the primeval fountains of Indian literature, I shall esteem him as a friend for having weeded my mind from a capital error."

His anniversary discourses to the Asiatic Society are considered to represent the entire scheme of his formulations. Quite apart from all the scholarly engagements with languages, and translations from Sanskrit and Persian texts, Jones’ project is essentially ethnographic. It is in the third anniversary discourse at the Asiatic society that he is said — and tirelessly quoted — as having articulated with clarity the idea of the Indo-European. This discourse achieves primarily the following: (a) Without discussing the antiquity of the Sanskrit, it states clearly that it is structurally a highly evolved and exhaustive language, perhaps more so that the Greek and Latin to which it is compared. (b) He also states clearly that these three languages bear deep affinities in their grammatical structures, and that they would therefore have emerged from a common source, possibly no longer extant.16 (c) He also argues that on the basis of similar reasons, there was space to assume that the Gothic and the Celtic families also possibly belonged in the same lineage, together with the Persian. What is most striking about these formulations — and at the same time most relevant for British ethnography — is that it establishes the position of the study of languages within ethnography.17 The next step is of course the highly disputed question of

16 He says, in what has now become the standard quote on his position in the anniversary discourses, “yet bearing to both of them (Greek and Latin) a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and I the forms of grammar, than could have been possibly produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which perhaps no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible for supposing, for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtaick, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit, and the old Persian might be added to the same family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of Persia.” in Trautmann, p. 38.

17 His classification of languages into Hamitic, Semitic and Japhetic varies. His conjectures and estimates with respect to family affinities are well informed and astute, even if at times mistaken. However, the enduring feature of his arguments is that Greek, Latin and Sanskrit belong together, irrespective of which language classification they are put under.
chronology, which one way or the other is ammunition for opposing standpoints on the issue of religion, and its propagation and practice within and outside Europe. Chronology is important simply because from the perspective that men like Jones are writing, it is imperative to establish a universally applicable span of time, which will make space for the histories and antiquities of different cultures and peoples, without endangering the Judeo-Christian claim to being the true and only possible origin of all history. Jones' ethnology is significant for the reason that it proposes the accommodation of the culture represented by the Sanskrit texts into the Mosaic timeframe. As Trautmann has explained,

"the exercise of matching up distant nations to the nations named in the Bible also required that the unfolding of the whole ethnological story be contained within the short chronology that the Peoples of the Book allotted to the peopling of the earth after the flood of Noah".

Jones makes judicious and selective use of material available to him. He uses the puranic story of the flood – pralay, which is its Sanskrit mythological equivalent – to mean the flood of Noah, but he completely rejects the highly specialised sense of time that India is supposed to have held, namely that time is cyclical, repeating itself on a gigantic scale. In fact, his rejection – the reasons for which are now obvious – had repercussions in Europe that created a complete consensus on the issue of trashing this cyclical notion of time. Jones gives a different structure for comparative time. As Trautmann has put it, "[B]oth the acceptance of Hindu flood mythology as history and the rejection of Indian cyclical time as mythology are part of the unifying project of the Mosaic ethnology."  

What we have described are predominantly eighteenth century features. The same central concerns inform a later and strikingly conflicting phase, steered in by the British state in anxiety that while many of the observations and findings of the

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18 In his 'On the Chronology of the Hindus', he give the following combination:

- Adam Manu I Krtayuga 4004 B.C.
- Noah ManuII 2948 B.C.
- the Flood fish, tortoise, boar avatars 2349 B.C.
- Nimrod Narasimha Treta yuga 2217 B.C.
- Bel Bali 2105 B.C.
- Raamah King Rama Dwapar yuga 2028 B.C.
- The Buddha Kali yuga 1026 B.C.

Cf., P. Marshall, ..............

19 Trautmann, p 59.
Sanskritists might be tenable, the consistent study of Sanskrit and other languages was getting in the way of maintaining a certain distance necessary for imperial governance. In a sharp and interesting historical turn, there was a brisk downturn in the enthusiasm about India, which, scholars have argued, was engineered by the British state. Independent social movements and political developments were also responsible for a different preoccupation with India. Evangelicalism and utilitarianism were responsible for the new phase in British Orientalism.

**The State Steps In: Changing face of British Ethnography of India**

Charles Grant and James Mill are the two responsible figures. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the message was already being formulated in critical biographies of Jones. Grant's text — *Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to morals; and the means of improving it*; published in 1797 — completes the message. It is basically a policy paper on governance, and argues for aggressive Anglicisation and christianisation of the Indian subjects. This is primarily in opposition to the stand held earlier by representatives of the colonial state, like Warren Hastings, who believed that respect for social and religious practices was absolutely essential. And, thus, "[I]t invented the reform agenda for British India and in doing so created a justification for British rule". The text has a highly evangelical tone, and also typifies a response of horror at the French revolution propagated by the lack of religion of Voltaire. Voltaire was important because he was very alert to the information emerging from the British Sanskritists, which he used as ammunition for his critique of Christianity — one might recall here that he had wholeheartedly received the work of Dow and Holwell, and used it for building his own conclusions. Charles Grant is also known to have had the backing of William Wilberforce, who was demanding that missionary activity be allowed in territories ruled by the Company, and by contemporary evangelicals. He argues that the differences — which earlier Sanskritists like Jones often converted into a language of brotherhood — between the British and the Indians, were not those of circumstance, but of innate

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moral depravity. It was the indolence and pusillanimity of the Indians that would never bring them to covet the liberal and egalitarian values practiced by the British state at home and not in India. James Mill's *History of British India* became an enduring model for colonial historiography. Mill's *History* needs to be considered in the light of the nineteenth century phase of British ethnography which was critical of the observation of the 'India hand' whose authority would necessarily be of a lesser order than that of the philosopher-historian, whose skills were acquired in the scholarly traditions of Europe, without the direct experience of observing Indian society.21 "As soon as everything of importance is expressed in writing, a man who is duly qualified may obtain more knowledge of India in one year in his closet in England, than he could obtain during the course of the longest life, by the use of his eyes and ears in India."22 However, Mill's criticism of the assumptions of Jones' work is not an issue within British ethnography. Mill's scheme stands on the idea of a scale of evolution of civilisations, from rude beginnings to higher achievements, with India representing the former.23 As a subtle justification of the project of colonisation, Mill's work is also embedded in his political conviction in utilitarianism, as well as his administrative duties in a slightly different phase of British colonial rule.24 In the *History*, there is a canny silence on the Indo-European concept, even as he takes issue with the work of Jones and its assumptions. It is a text that repeatedly stresses the difference between the British and their subjects, and follows a similar vein as that of Grant. The manifestations of this dimension of colonial thinking on India were the policies on education and state patronage of educational institutions, which would formalise the teaching of indigenous languages

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21 'The metropolitan stay-at-home', as Trautmann calls such a theorist, is better equipped for culling the gist of a culture, than one who merely collects facts, as someone with direct experiences of the languages and social practices of Indian people. P. 119
22 As quoted in Trautmann, p. 119.
23 This is not to say, that Jones' worked in any way on the premise of any kind of equality with Asian civilisations: the past may have many fascinating areas of study, but the present was clearly different, with European civilisation as the superior instance.
24 "... what profoundly separated James from Mill, and the Oriental renaissance from British Indophobia, was the power of ancient wisdom in one, and of progress or future wisdom in the other." Trautmann, p. 129.
and literatures. These two figures are representative of the metamorphosis of British orientalism.

In the entire canvas of European Indology, they also represent the differences with the continental tradition. It is with this later phase that one can better understand the striking difference between the two traditions when it came to the institutionalisation of Sanskrit studies in universities – in comparison to the ardent state sponsorship for Sanskrit and Indological studies in Germany, Britain’s efforts were rather wan. This is one face of the ‘Orientalisms’ in Europe, negotiated through colonial instrumentality, and quite directly linked with producing a discourse, which, through the logic of a civilising mission, would provide a justification for the colonial project. For this, a critique of the orientalists was necessary: attendant upon this turn was the inevitable criticism of Indian ‘civilisation’ as being of a necessarily lower order, the study of which could not even remotely be considered useful. This phase was not a natural progression – for the enthusiasm for India studies had not diminished naturally – but a phase created by the compulsions of a more deeply embedded colonial rule, which had begun to assume proportions not known in the time of the early Sanskritists.

With this example of the beginnings of Indology within the parameters of colonial relations, we can see that the question of origins, and of chronology – a core element of the discipline, which also linked it with others like anthropology – was manipulated with conclusive political consequences for governance and historiography.

26 Here, we also need to remember Macaulay’s famous Minute on Indian Education (1835). It is important for proposing the straightforward imposition of European knowledge as against the insistence of the Orientalists that it should be carried on the backbone of indigenous linguistic and knowledge systems. For Anglicists like Macaulay, English, not Sanskrit was to be to India that Greek and Latin had been for Britain.
The Vexed Question of German Indology: 
A Self-reflexive Orientalism

Justifications of the colonial project and a corresponding ethnography are a relatively simple paradigm, going by the Saidian framework. Missionary endeavour also is a suitable occasion for systematic documentation of a people, and there were missionaries from many parts in Europe who lived and worked in India and left behind a great deal of work, both scientific and not-so-scientific. Often, what work missionaries did, went hand in hand with other economic and political interests. Yet, Germany has had a slightly complex position in this debate: she never ruled India, and did not even have conclaves of local rule, German missionaries worked mostly in the southern peninsula and their influence and work was filtered through the space left by British colonialism. Interestingly also, many Germans who have left behind accounts of their experiences in India, and missionaries who have been credited with intensive study of the southern languages, came under the patronage of the Danish and other governments.27 There, in fact, are many instances of the British seeking information about the areas covered by German missionaries before Britain became a colonial power in India.28 Even so, as a nation, Germany has been granted that somewhat special place of a historical and cultural soul mate with respect to its encouragement of Indological studies throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Precisely this fact has stamped a big question mark on scholarship on Indology after Said. The question is really quite simple: why such generous state sponsorship – and also general percolation of India as a literary motif – for studying India and its ancient history, languages and religion,29 without colonial instrumentality? Discussing this debate is relevant to building the background for our examination of indigenous notions of history because it exemplifies another model of

27 Most notable example is Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg. The Danish king’s missionary interests in southern India became deeply linked with the Halle Pietists, of whom Ziegenbalg was one. Cf. Heike Liebau, “German Missionaries as Research Workers in India: Their Diaries as Historical Sources, Benjamin Shultze, [1689-1760] Exception or Norm?”, Studies in History, Vol 11, Number 1, Jan-June 1995, pp 101-118.
29 I say religion – and not religions – because the assumption was made early along the way the India was synonymous with ‘Hindu’, and the materials for study were in fact classical texts in Sanskrit. It is only much later, nearly in the latter half of the twentieth century that we have a more engaged and diverse scholarship from within Germany on India specifically and south Asia generally.
an urgent search for an ancient past, which according to some scholars, culminated in the Indology of the Nazi period. Keeping this idea somewhere close at hand in our analysis should be of use in dealing with questions of history as they have unfolded also in contemporary India. But first, a brief account of the space Germany occupies within European Indology.

**Early Accounts: Un‘romantic’ and Straightforward?**

German missionaries played an important role in the Christianising mission, specifically in the southern peninsula, and shared noticeably in the discourse about the orient from that position. However, scholars and men of letters played an equally significant role in the institutionalisation of the orient in German intellectual history. German interest in the orient carries the context of the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment and of the Romantic tradition in Germany. As literary and intellectual movements they had at their core a concern for contemporary European religious practices, as well as a consistent engagement with the contemporary political and social movements and their impact on the class structure of European and specifically German society. Scholars believe that there were continuities between the two phases. The Enlightenment was characterised by a critical view of Christianity and of European society, and “[O]ne shape which the criticism of Christianity took was the attempt to trace it back to older, more original traditions, or the view that a more pristine religious consciousness could be found in Asia and specifically in India. […] Both this motivation towards self-criticism and the theme of origins was assimilated into the Romantic awareness of India and the Orient”. To grasp the range of concerns that drove the interest of the German-speaking world in India, we need to remember this as a primary context.

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31 Halbfass, p. 69.
While nations like Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Denmark were all involved in one manner or another of trade, missionary or colonising activity in relation to India – in which Britain was eventually quite successful – Germany was not far behind. While Germany never had any direct colonial rights, its missionary activity in the southern peninsula was substantial. India’s presence was felt in Germany since the early modern period.\(^{32}\) The earliest ‘eyewitness account’ of India by a German belongs to Balthasar Sprenger, a trader who was part of a Portuguese expedition to India in 1505/06, and represented the trading house of Fugger and Welser, on the southwest coast of India.\(^{33}\) It is a short account, but valuable as a representative text, as the earliest account of the perceptions of a German trader about what he saw within a span of three months. It is hardly unexpected that this text should be unreliable for geographical and political information, but at the same time, it is also very revealing in terms of strategies it employs to interest and involve a European readership. It mixes contemporary Christian mythology with popular perceptions about India as an earthly paradise.\(^{34}\) It ventures into descriptions of the caste system, and of the political set-up, and highlights the rich trade opportunities at the time. This text is important also because for nearly a century after it was published, commerce between Germany and India was cut short by the monopoly of Portuguese undertakings, and there appeared no new ‘eyewitness accounts’ for practically the entire period. Another text that is not an account of a travelling trader represents the German humanist tradition. Sebastian Franck’s *Weltbuch* (1534) devotes a section to India, pretty much in the tone of describing an earthly paradise. While describing the social organisation, the daily life of the people of India and political organisation under the kings of the western coast, which was more familiar through texts that had appeared through Europe, Franck’s section on India actually seems to recreate utopia.\(^{35}\) Equally typical of sixteenth century descriptions of India, this earthly paradise is balanced out by descriptions of strange and monstrous people and animals found here. What is obvious is that there is a widespread influence of already popular stereotypes about India, which increasingly get modified or

\(^{32}\) Between 1477 and 1750, in the German-speaking world, there are said to have appeared over 350 *printed* sources, and many more in manuscript form. Gita Dharampal-Frick, *Zwischen Utopie und Empirie: Indien im Spiegel deutscher Reisebeschreibungen der Frühen Neuzeit*, Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch, Stuttgart, 1987, p 400.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p 400.

\(^{34}\) Ibid, p 400.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 403
contradicted in successive texts as the case may be. While sixteenth century texts describe an alien reality with a good measure of fantasy, as the opportunities for contact grow, representations of India take on the first shades of ideological contestations. The earliest representations are a more simple indicator of projecting an 'otherness' on the people described, while those written at the height of growth of imperialism generally become tools of contextualising the European politics vis-a-vis the new world. In the seventeenth century, the number of Germans to encounter Indian coastlines – often on their way to southeast Asia – grew, especially since Holland employed many of those who were to travel in their service. Dharampal-Frick has pointed out that these descriptions were very positive and largely uncritical of social practices that might – and did too – at another time have brought on much criticism. These accounts speak of the fertility of the land and of the friendliness of the people. Social hierarchies are taken to be normal and natural. Racial connotations are entirely missing. Clearly this is not to be interpreted as friendliness in representation, for reasons we shall note further.

A tendency to scientifically observe Indian social organisation has been noted in work that follows towards the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century. Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1682-1719) was a very important figure within this trend. He was among the first German Protestant missionaries to come to India. He and a companion Pluetschau arrived in Tranquebar on the recommendation of King Frederick IV of Denmark and Norway. He armed himself with formidable knowledge of Tamil, started a school and an orphanage, and is the author of a Tamil grammar in Latin. His manuscripts described minutely the religious and social customs of the people of the area, and urged that an in-depth study of the Hindu religion would be enlightening for European society. Much of his work was published only posthumously and translated even later, but is said to represent a source of much reliability on contemporary Tamil Nadu. While his

36 ibid, p. 404.
37 Ibid, p 405.
38 The Raja of Tanjore had leased Tranquebar to the Danish East India Company. Valentina Stach-Rosen, German Indologists: Biographies of Scholars in Indian Studies Writing in German, p. 3.
39 His Genealogie der Malabarischen Götter was edited by W. Germann and printed in Madras in 1867. An English translation was published in 1869. His Ausführliche Beschreibung des Malabarischen Heidentums was published in 1926 by the Dutch scholar W. Caland. Stache-Rosen, p. 4.
work is relatively free of the characteristics of the sixteenth century, it suggests a belief in the state of innocence in which Indians are supposed to have remained, in spite of never having been part of the Christian revelation. With first-hand experience of social and religious practices in Tamil Nadu, his wariness about generalisations regarding the civilising of a 'heathen' people became pronounced. In a letter he is known to have commented how these generalisations are possible only in the absence of the knowledge of the language and religion of the people he was working with.\textsuperscript{40} His work was not recognised during his lifetime because the ecclesiastical orthodoxy believed that missionaries were sent to India to preach Christianity and awaken people out of their heathenness, not to propagate heathen values in Europe.\textsuperscript{41}

Towards Racialising Linguistic Affinities: Romanticism and Scientificity

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, while German classicism reigned in Weimar under Goethe and Schiller, a new movement was building itself around a younger generation in Jena and was to grow into an early phase of Romanticism. It was a reaction also against the rigid ideals of Greek classicism that were being propagated and upheld by Winckelmann. Literary historians of the period have provided useful interpretations of the concerns of the period, which would be particularly fitting to understand the impulses behind the increasing interest in the orient, especially India. The Romantic tradition is interpreted as a critique of growing capitalism, of widespread industrialisation, often interpreted as the result of the French revolution.\textsuperscript{42} In the discourse generated in this intellectual milieu, India became a tool for locating European society in a past, on a scale of evolution. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) considered a major figure within the Romantic

\textsuperscript{40} Kamath, pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{41} Dharampal-Frick, p 406.
\textsuperscript{42} As an older Marxist writer had put it, “Die kapitalistische Produktionsweise setzte sich nach der französischen bürgerlichen Revolution erfolgreich durch. Doch dem ökonomisch-technischen Fortschritt und dem Einzug der bürgerlichen Freiheiten folgten unmittelbar die Schattenseiten der der neuen Ordnung: die Anarchie der Produktion und Konsumtion, die Auflösung der menschlichen Bindungen durch die Allmacht des Geldes, der Eoismus und die Profitsucht als bewegendes Prinzip, das sie Froderung nach bürgerlicher Tugend, nach Freiheit, Gleichheit und Brüderlichkeit zu leeren Deklarationen erstarrten ließ. […] Die negativen Begleiterscheinungen der Kapitalisierung boten den Anlaß für die romantische antikapitalistische Kritik”. Geerdts, p. 279.
Movement was also in significant ways responsible for giving India a different space in the German imagination. He is also considered representative of the trend of 'cultural relativism' in western Europe, with a critique of extraneous representations of people that European literature and ethnography was prone to making. He argued for representations of a people 'from within' instead of "all the talk of what use their land is, how it can be better subjugated, exploited, tortured, manipulated and ruined.' In his conception of history, the notion of organic growth is prominent, and the growth of mankind was necessarily akin to that of a tree, from a single source with various dispersals like branches. This leads him to the belief that on the scale of the evolution of mankind, the orient was the state of childhood and Rome, for instance, would be adulthood. Implicit is also a reaction to the propagation of Hellenism by Winckelmann, whose work had a considerable impact on German aesthetic and philosophical trends. Winckelmann's insistence that in order to reproduce nature in art, a faith in the Greek ideal was essential produces a reaction with Herder. Within a mould of cultural history, he tried to position Greece differently. For Herder, the Greek model is considered the youth of mankind - developed by the Orient and Egypt - in a developmental process, rather than as an absolute standard. At the same time as he questions the absolute validity of Greek culture, he also questions the exercise of political power by Europe in various parts of the world. The supposedly mechanistic and inhuman facets of the Enlightenment and of contemporary society create the need to seek redemption through the resurrection of the childhood of mankind. In this scheme, India fits very well. At the time, Herder had access to many translations that were becoming important sources within

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45 Martin Bernal calls Winckelmann "[T]he greatest champion of Greek youth and purity in the mid-18th century". P 212. Winckelmann's insistence was on the superiority of Greek art on account of what he considered to be primary features - liberty and youth.

the German-speaking world. His perspective on India is complex, because it is largely free of naive glorification, and does not quite look at India as a state to which to return. It is critical of social organisation in India, and there is also the suggestion that doctrinal flaws over time have produced disastrous social and political results. The childhood-of-mankind concept not only looks for the beginnings of Europe, but also situates the birth of humanity itself in the orient. Herder is critical of the contemporary religious and political scenario, and of missionary activity in Asia, and questions the exploitation of Asia by Europe from behind the masks of love of humanity.

Friedrich Schlegel's landmark text, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* which appeared in 1808, marks the beginning of a serious comparative engagement with language as a historical source. This was the beginning of the nineteenth century and clearly, Schlegel had access to a larger body of knowledge produced about India both through the British as well as the continental tradition. He had also had the rare opportunity of being taught Sanskrit by Alexander Hamilton, who was then teaching at the East India College at Haileybury and happened to be in Paris when Schlegel went there in 1802. He was impelled by the fact that after witnessing work by the likes of Jones and Wilkins, historians of the ancient world were anxious to gain clues to the 'dawn of civilisation' about which so little was known, and those interested in literature hoped to see more instances of the 'beauty of the Asian spirit'. This text has a section each on language, philosophy and historical ideas. His discussion on language sets out the fundamentals of estimating an

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47 At the time, Herder has had access to a large body of translations of Sanskrit texts by the British Sanskritists in Calcutta, - Wilkins' Bhagavadgita and Hitopadesa and Jones' Sakuntala. Also translations of Holwell and Dow etc. were available to him. Halbfass, p. 70.
48 This is a reference to the doctrine of metempsychosis, which, according to him, awakens sympathy for all living things, but reduces the feelings to the true sufferings of members of humankind.
49 Dalmia-Lüderitz, p. 435.
50 The East India College was set up to counter the ill-effects of exposing young men from Britain in the service of the colonial state to Indian studies. The new college had been able to strike an agreement that the initial period of training for colonial officials to serve in India would happen at Haileybury, where some very eminent scholars were given positions. It was in the midst of this evangelical anxiety Alexander Hamilton had found a position at the college. Trautmann, p. 114.
affinity with the ancient language of the Indians. He sets forth the framework of affinities between the Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, as well as Persian. According to him, this is not a similarity merely of a vast number of roots, but a striking structural and grammatical affinity.\(^2\) It is not something accidental, which could be explained away with the theory of random intermixing. In fact it is an affinity that suggests that these languages have a common origin, and also that the Sanskrit – for which he uses the term ‘indische Sprache’\(^3\) – is the older of the four, and from which they were also derived. He also sets out other language groups in difference and says that there is little of the Sanskrit in common with Slavic and Celtic languages and those of the Hebraic group. To substantiate his argument, he compares a large number of roots, and grammatical structures. The section on philosophy does a comparative examination of the mythology and the philosophy as found in the Sanskrit texts accessible to him, while also clarifying that this is a necessary endeavour in spite of the vast difference between the meaning of languages and mythologies, which require highly nuanced interpretive skills. He examines a set of philosophical doctrines – which he also says are the very fundament of existence in India, and have been for thousands of years – within Indian philosophy, namely metempsychosis, emanation, naturalism, dualism and pantheism. On the basis of a critical examination of these doctrines, he draws parallels with Hellenic doctrines – in the case of Pythagoras’ metempsychosis, for instance – to argue that they possibly had their origin in ancient Egyptian or Indian philosophy.\(^4\) In his third and last section, he builds upon the same structure to examine the epic and poetic traditions of Egypt, India and Greece. With respect to oriental and Indian studies, he says that they have been falsely segregated from those about Europe in the palette of universal knowledge. In the sphere of creative expression also, there are deep affinities, and he detects what he calls the Asian sensibility in medieval literatures of Europe.\(^5\) Moreover, just as one looks at peoples of both civilisations as components of the same continuum, by the

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\(^2\) "Die Übereinstimmung ist also keine zufällige, die sich aus Einmischung erklären ließe; sondern eine wesentliche, die auf gemeinschaftlicher Abstammung deutet. Bei der Vergleichung ergibt sich ferner, daß die indische Sprache die ältere sei, die anderen aber jünger und aus jener abgeleitet". Ibid, p 115.

\(^3\) Translated, it means ‘Indian language’.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 215.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 313.
same logic, the literatures of both should be looked upon as a unified whole.\textsuperscript{56} In his perspective, Indian studies should contribute much in the manner that classical studies have contributed to the maturity of European sensibilities — it would contribute to discovering the missing links with antiquity, while putting modern Europe in touch with many poetic and philosophical treasures.

For Schlegel, Sanskrit is not the language of the childhood of man, but a derivative of another, which spread itself over parts of Asia and Europe. It is a language that in his opinion would have been responsible for bringing to the north the dignity and magnificence that legends in India are so full of — a matter of much concern, according to him for the history of the fatherland.\textsuperscript{57} For Schlegel, unlike Herder, the orient is not the measure for all humanity, but the original home of the European languages and peoples. He clearly separates the above from the Semitic, African and southern American languages. These, in his opinion, are necessarily of a lower order, mere atoms, which could be easily dispersed.\textsuperscript{58} While we find a critique of the colonial politics of Europe in Herder’s work, with Schlegel, there is in fact the perception, that it is the task of European nations to bring to the others the merits of higher intellectual development.\textsuperscript{59} Martin Bernal has interpreted Schlegel’s work in the context of what according to him had become the “Egyptian problem”. He argues that the idea of a common ancestry between Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, “and the knowledge, through the Indian tradition, that the Brahmans were the descendants of ‘Aryan’ conquerors who had come from the highlands of Central Asia — fitted wonderfully with the German Romantic belief that mankind and the Caucasians had originated in the mountains of Central Asia.”\textsuperscript{60} He also interprets Schlegel’s romanticisation of Indians and the separation of the Semitic and African languages from what came later to be known as the Indo-European, as a tool to deal with the

\textsuperscript{56} “So wie nun in der Völkergeschichte die Asiaten und die Europäer nur eine große Familie, Asien und Europa ein unzertrennbare Ganzes bilden, so sollte man sich immer bemühen, auch die Literatur aller gebildeten Völker als eine fortgeehende Entwicklung und ein einziges innig verbundenes Gebäude und Gebilde, als ein großes Ganze zu betrachten, wo denn manch einseitige und beschränkte Ansicht von selbst verschwinden, vieles im Zusammenhange erst verständlich, alles aber in diesem Lichte neu, erscheinen würde”. Ibid., p. 315.

\textsuperscript{57} “...nicht bloß der äussere Drang der Not, sondern irgend ein wunderbarer Begriff von der hohen Würde und Herrlichkeit des Nordens, wie wir ihn in den indischen Sagen überall verbreitet finden, habe sie nordwärts geführt.” Ibid., p. 293.

\textsuperscript{58} Schlegel, p. 273.

\textsuperscript{59} Dalma-Lüderitz, p. 437.

question of how Africans could have produced such a ‘high’ civilisation. In such a critique is also boldly articulated the sense that language was put to use to define notions of culture in very racial terms.  

Given especially the rise of the nation state-language-religion triad, which was on the rise in European politics, it is of importance to recognise the use that a scientific and classificatory study of languages was put to in the European intellectual tradition. Schlegel’s text, in this case, is among the earliest to focus on language in a manner to make way for central precepts of comparative philology, within the Orientalist/ethnographic project. In its articulation of the concept of affinities between Greek, Sanskrit and Latin, it segregates primarily Semitic and African civilisations. In this, it is a move that still falls within the category of those critiqued by Said in Orientalism, and also racialises history by its segregations. It also necessarily forms a basis on which theorisation on history stands, and determines the future perceptions about the role of Asia within the political map of nation states.

In this respect, Hegel is a figure not to be left out of this sketch. His context in this respect is his negative attitude towards Romanticism, and its glorification of the Orient. He was very alert to all the sources pouring in about India, but British sources find most space. His theorisation on the nature of history is crucial for the future constitution of Asia – and for that matter, Africa, China etc – in the temporality accorded to them by world history and ethnography. “According to Hegel, the Orient is essentially beginning, introduction, preparation. The way of the ‘Weltgeist’ leads from the East to the West. The Occident supersedes the Orient, and in dealing with the oriental traditions, it faces, in a sense, its own petrified past. Compared to Europe, Asia, and India in particular, is ‘static’, i.e., without the dynamics of progress which characterises European history.”

Hegel describes India as a land of fantasy and emotion. In his conception, all the ideas of being-in-itself, to a sense of

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61 At this time, there was a discussion within German Romanticism of Germany as a “Sprachnation”.
62 “Schlegel insisted that there was a categorical distinction between affixing – the external addition suffixes or other particles to a word – and inflection, in which the ‘root’ was modified internally in what he saw as an organic way. Unfortunately for Indo-European superiority, the Semitic languages are modified in precisely this way, and the term ‘root’ itself is taken from Hebrew grammar.” Bernal, p. 231.
63 Halbfass, p 88.
64 “Indien, wie China, ist ebenso eine frühe wie eine noch gegenwärtige Gestalt, die statarisch und festgeblieben ist und in der vollständigste Ausbildung nach innen sich vollendet hat. Es ist immer das Land der Sehnsucht gewesen und erscheint uns noch als ein Wunderreich, als eine verzauberte Welt.

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individual and political freedom, which were so integral to the French Revolution, for instance, have been entirely absent in India. Indian philosophy and religion are inseparable, and that religion is religion of “substantiality” – where god is ultimate substance, abstract, pure, “being-in-itself, which contains all finite and particular beings as non-essential modifications leaving them without any identity and dignity of their own.”

The process in history which in this case would mean a modification of each – the idea of the infinite and finite beings, mortal creatures of the world – through a dialectical interaction in favour of the finite, this-worldly, within philosophical discourse is absent. In the Hegelian scheme it is a process, which is crucial also to the political evolution of a society in terms of notions of individual freedom, a task successfully achieved only by the European intellect. Therefore:

“Der Orient wußte und weiß nur, daß Einer frei ist, die griechische und römische Welt, daß Einige frei seien, die germanische Welt weiß, daß Alle frei sind. Die erste Form, die wir daher in der Weltgeschichte sehen, ist der Despotismus, die zweite ist die Demokratie und Aristokratie, und die dritte ist die Monarchie.”

His characterisation of the religion, philosophy and political institutions of the orient and especially of India as being incapable of political evolution and progress give them a totally different measure of time. It is a recurring feature of western historiography and ethnography to accord a time in the past to the represented. It is important to look at this feature of western philosophy because it is an area that has extremely lasting and far-reaching consequences for the analysis of political institutions and history in the context of Orientalism.

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65 Halbfass, p. 88.
II

"By Careful Induction": Race and Language at the Service of History

In continuation of our description of the various representative constructions of an Orient, especially such as have left an imprint in Indian characterisations of the past, Friedrich Max Mueller's work in Comparative Philology is well over the mark. He is also a difficult figure in the sense that his early training happened in the 'Germanic' tradition, and all his life work, for which he is known, was done in Britain. Under Hermann Brockhaus he studied classical Philology and Sanskrit at the University of Leipzig. In Berlin the poet and Orientalist Friedrich Rückert, taught him the rudiments in Persian. His short stint in Berlin reads like a who's who of nineteenth century Germany. In Paris, Eugene Burnouf encouraged him to publish his work on the Rigveda. It was on his arrival in Oxford where he finally settled, that he took up this project with concerted effort.

German Indology was an established discipline by the time Max Mueller became a major proponent. With his intensive study of Sanskrit, he believed that comparative philology was a crucial path to understanding the history of man's origins. Following Franz Bopp and others, it was held that there were close relationships between all Indo-European languages and an "Ursprache" common to all members of this language group. Since Sanskrit was one among the oldest of all

68 Cf. Johannes Voigt, F. Max Mueller — The man and his Ideas, K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1967, for a good critical profile of Max Mueller's work, with a short sketch of his early training. This book was useful in situating Max Mueller as a German, who, in spite of a life spent in Britain, holds a place of importance in German intellectual history. A probable reason could be the long standing engagement that Germany has had with India in its philosophical and literary tradition. It is a well-known fact, that the Indian branch of the Goethe Institut is called Max Mueller Bhavan.
69 Cf. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, The Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich MaxMüller, P. C., Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1974, for a most wonderful account of not just a 'life' but a milieu, where the elites who created a renaissance in various parts of the world mingle into the canvas of a period. Clearly, this biography is very different from the more modern scholarly biographies - it is more 'old school', and carries so many facts that are rarely used as the stuff of historical scholarship, but are very interesting to the historian nevertheless.
70 Voigt, p xii.
71 He began first with teaching modern languages, and later in a post created especially for him, he taught Comparative Philology. It is said that in naming a successor to the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit after the death of H. H. Wilson, Monier Monier-Williams, who had taught in Haileybury, was chosen above Max Mueller. The professorship was "privately endowed for the purpose propagation of Christianity by translation of the Bible into Sanskrit...in which Max Mueller's broad religious views and foreign birth worked against him, even though he was much the better Sanskritist." Trautmann, p. 173.
Indo-European languages, Max Mueller thought it would be a clue to the common language of these projected Indo-European ancestors, the Aryans. A strong proponent of linguistics as a physical science, he tried to provide a philosophical and scientific basis for comparative philology and religion. His interest in Sanskrit and in the ancient history of religions in India must be understood in these terms.

His importance for our narrative here is that he is responsible for the concept of the Aryan race, both, within Comparative Philology in Europe as well as its historical application in Indian historiography. Considering that he also stood in opposition to those who were against the study of Sanskrit, arguing that Sanskrit did not hold affinities with the old languages of Europe, we need to examine his position as differentiated from either of those we overviewed in the first part of this chapter. In a paper delivered early in his career, Mueller argues out the derivation of Bangla from Sanskrit, also putting forth the two-race theory, according to which Indians would be “one great branch of the Caucasian race [not Hamians as Jones and Bryant had it], differing from other branches of the same race merely by its darker complexion.” That in fact is the backbone of his work, which we shall analyse thematically and also with a closer analysis of some of his lectures. This lecture explains the linguistic variety within the same subcontinent – languages in the south sharing similarities with tribal dialects in the north – to show how with the arrival of the Aryan tribes the north went through a greater degree of assimilation, whereas in central India, they left large parts undisturbed under the rule of the indigenous ‘dark races’. In southern India, the Aryans – and they are in his narrative also synonymous with Brahmins – assumed the languages and practices of “the aboriginal people, and

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72 In profiles of Max Mueller (e.g. Voigt 1981), it is said that his concern with religion derives primarily from the effect of Darwinism and the interconnections between language, history and religion. Mueller defines his project as follows: “... as historians we must allow the same treatment to all. We have simply to collect all the evidence that can be found on the history of religion all over the world, to sift and classify it, and thus to try to discover the necessary antecedents of all faith, the laws which govern the growth and decay of human religion, and the God to which all religion tends.” As quoted in Johannes H. Voigt, p 16.

73 The reference here is to a lecture delivered on the insistence of Mueller’s patron Baron Christian Bunsen, at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Oxford. It was Mueller’s first ever lecture in English, and was titled “On the Relation of the Bengali to the Arian and aboriginal languages of India”. As quoted in Trautmann, p 174.
of conveying through its medium their knowledge and instruction to the minds of uncivilised tribes.”  

Divide et impera.
Classified and understood, historically

Mueller’s insistence on the historical study of languages is postulated in the axiom that the first manifestation of thought is speech, and that therefore language can help us recover the original nature of human thought. This idea was based on the conclusion that language was subject to the laws of nature and could thus be examined on the same principles as those applied to other physical sciences, and applied historically, it would yield similar results for reconstructing a past which is long buried by the tide of time. According to the same principles, it would be possible to base conjectures about not merely more ancient linguistic formations, but also of ancient processes of thought. The objective of the study of languages holds for him these possibilities because,

"[L]anguage still bears the impress of the earliest thoughts of man, obliterated, it may be, buried under new thoughts, yet here and there still recoverable in their sharp original outline. The growth of language is continuous, and by continuing our researches backward from the most modern to the most ancient strata, the very elements and roots of human speech have been reached, and with them the elements and roots of human thought. What lies beyond the beginnings of language, however interesting it may be to the physiologist, does not yet belong to the history of man, I the true and original sense of that word. Man means the thinker, and the first manifestation of that thought is speech.”  

In the quest for the roots of human thought, the study of language is a tool that he considers indispensable. It is a tool that is meant to be of use in a larger purpose, which also includes the comparative study of religions, given the availability of translated texts of ancient times in contemporary Europe. Discoveries like these – of the literatures of the ancient peoples –

"prove that there is a natural order in language, and that by careful induction, laws can be established which enable us to guess with probability either at the

74 As quoted in Trautmann, p.176.
form or meaning of words where but scanty fragments of the tongue itself have come down to us."\textsuperscript{76}

These texts have provided European scholars with the opportunity to test their hypotheses about the scientficity of the study of languages, and have in turn confirmed the beliefs of scholars like Mueller, that the science of language can be of much help in historicizing the various documents according to their usages. Such historicisation therefore sifts through the supposed corruptions by man and time, and helps put the concerned text within a time frame.

\textbf{Religion/history: Faith and the Test of Science}

Max Mueller's project is an epistemic endeavour geared to fit the larger scheme of determining the nature of ancient thought. The question of religion as a tool of historical understanding is central. The underlying assumption is that there is a universally applicable connection between language and religion and that is the fundament on which any society – ancient or modern – stands.\textsuperscript{77} In one of these lectures on the Science of Religion he uses the question "what makes a people?" as the base of his argument about the centrality of religion as a tool of historical analysis. He prefers the use of religion as a category rather than that of states or forms of government, because,

"[A]llegiance to the same government, particularly in ancient times, is the result, rather than the cause of nationality; while in historical times, such has been the confusion produced by extraneous influences, by brute force, of dynastic ambition, that the natural development of peoples has been entirely arrested, and we frequently find one and the same people divided by different governments, and different people united under the same ruler."\textsuperscript{78}

He looks for a feature of cohesion between people, which is something other than the 'community of blood' which might form clans or families, "but never produces that

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{77} "...the only scientific and truly genetic classification of religions is the same as the classification of languages, and that, particularly in the early history of the human intellect, there exists the most intimate relationship between language, religion and nationality – a relationship quite independent of those physical elements, the blood, the skull, or the hair, on which ethnologists have attempted to found their classification of the human race." Mueller, \textit{Introduction to the Science of Religion}, Four Lectures delivered at the Royal Institution in February and May 1870, London, Longman's Green and Co., 1882, pp 81-82.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Introduction to the Science of Religion}, pp. 84-85.
higher and purely moral feeling which binds men together and makes them a people.” 79 At this point, he draws an interesting comparison between the aboriginal inhabitants of North America and the ancient Greeks. He says,

“[I]t is language and religion that make a people, but religion is even a more powerful agent than language. The languages of many of the aboriginal inhabitants of Northern America are but dialectic varieties of one type, but those who spoke these dialects seem never to have coalesced into a people. They remained mere clans or wandering tribes, and even their antagonism to foreign invaders did not call out the sense of a national coherence and unity among them, because they were without that higher sense of unity which is called forth, or, at all events, strengthened, by worshipping the same god or gods. The Greeks, on the contrary, though speaking their strongly marked, and I doubt whether mutually intelligible dialects, the Æolic, the Doric, the Ionic, felt themselves at all times, even when ruled by different tyrants, or broken up into numerous republics, as one great Hellenic people.” 80

So what was it in spite of dialects and dynasties that feeling of ideal unity which constitutes a people? “It was their primitive religion; it was a dim recollection of the common allegiance they owed from time immemorial to the great father of gods and men; it was their belief in the old Zeus of Dodona, the pan-Hellenic Zeus.” 81 The preference that religion as central to his historical analysis has over social divisions or political institutions is because “[T]he idea of god constitutes the general foundation of a people. Whatever is the form of religion, the same is the form of a state and its constitution.” 82

Another dimension to the same issue is a more personal need to reconfirm – scientifically – a faith in religion, to assert its social function and scientific validity. In one of the lectures in the Science of Religion, he expresses concern over the damage done to the understanding of religions older than Christianity, by prejudice.

“If a comparative study of the religions of the world produced but this one result, that it drove this godless heresy out of every Christian heart, and made us see again in the whole history of the world the eternal wisdom and love of God towards all his creatures, it would have done a good work.” 83

In his view, the very justification for human existence is to be derived from religion. He is aware of the implications of such a view, but holds nevertheless:

79 Ibid, p. 85.
80 Ibid, p. 85.
81 Ibid, pp 85-86.
82 Science of Religion, p. 90.
83 Science of Religion, p. 45.
"I know this is a view which has been much objected to, but I hold it as strongly as ever. If we must not read in the history of the whole human race the daily lessons of a Divine teacher and guide, if there is no purpose, (...) in the succession of the religions of the world, then we might as well shut up the godless book of history altogether and look upon men as no better than the grass which is to-day in the field and to-morrow is cast into the oven. Man would then be indeed of less value than the sparrows, for none of them is forgotten before God." 84

It is the spirit of religion that needs to be sought out over and beyond the merely mortal corruptions and distortions. Therefore, to understand religion — which has seen excesses in which men have been burnt alive at the stake for a doubt or a theological argument — one must look beyond these excesses. 85 More specifically, his quest for the "true spirit" of Christianity is unmistakable. Comparative scrutiny against other religions would strengthen its position, and would

"for the first time assign to Christianity its right place among the religions of the world; it will show for the first time fully what was meant by the fullness of time; it will restore to the whole history of the world in its unconscious progress towards Christianity, its true and sacred character." 86

Even as he insists that the science of religion is truly scientific in nature and that any religion should be subjected to scrutiny with objectivity — without the wish to either exalt or degrade — he elaborates —

"Christianity enjoyed no privileges, and claimed no immunities when it boldly confronted and confounded the most ancient and the most powerful religions of the world. Even at present it craves no mercy, and it receives no mercy from those whom our missionaries have to meet face to face in every part of the world. Unless Christianity has ceased to be what it was, its defenders should not shrink from this new trial of strength, but should encourage rather than depreciate the study of comparative theology," and "let me remark this in the very beginning, that no other religion with the exception of Buddhism, perhaps would have favoured the idea of an impartial comparison of the principal religions of the world — would even have tolerated our science. Nearly every religion seems o adopt the language of the Pharisee rather than the Publican. It is Christianity alone, which as the religion of humanity, as the religion of no caste, of no chosen people has taught us to study the history of mankind, as our own, to discover the traces of a divine wisdom and love in the development in all the races of the world

84 Ibid, p. 151.
85 He says, "People who judge of religions in that spirit will never understand their real purport, will never reach their sacred springs. These are the excrescences, the mere excrescences of all religions. We might as well judge of the health of the people from its hospitals, or of its morality from its prisons. If we want to judge of a religion, we must try to study it as much as possible in the mind of its founder; and when that is impossible, as it is but too often, try to find it in the lonely chamber and the sick-room, rather than in the colleges of the augurs and the councils of priests." Ibid, p. 191.
and to recognise, if possible, even in the lowest and crudest forms of religious belief, not the work of the devil, but something that indicated a divine guidance ... In no religion was there a soil so well prepared for the cultivation of comparative theology as in our own.\footnote{Science of Religion, p. 29.}

The objective of using strictly scientific principles is to reach the “essence”, the original, religion in its “true spirit”. He adheres to the view that there is an inevitable decay in all religions, for all religion suffers from its contact with the world, and has to return to its fountainhead. Tracing any religion to its founder is to reach its purest fount, since teachings are often interpreted and dispersed in various ways which can eventually contradict the original doctrine. The quest of the Science of Religion for truth has a social relevance in this that it can help people to arrive at truth based conclusions regarding their faith.

“If missionaries could show to the Brahmans, the Buddhists, the Zoroastrians, nay, even to the Mohammedans how much their present faith differs from the faith of their forefathers and founders if they could place in their hands and read with them in a kindly spirit, the original documents on which these various religions professed to be founded and enable them to distinguish between the doctrines of their own sacred books and the additions of later ages, an important advantage would be gained, and the choice between Christ and other masters would be rendered far more easy to many a truth seeking soul.\footnote{Chips, Vol I, Introduction, p xxvi.}"

He is also quite critical of the tactics of missionaries in India, and expresses the need that the Christianising mission, like the project of colonisation should be carried out with understanding, and cogent argument. The ‘history of man’ that he refers to in his defence of Comparative Philology, does not shake his faith in Christianity as the superior religion, as we have also seen in the preceding rather long-winded textual analysis. In his many interactions with reformers and other leaders from India, particularly Bengal, his view of the conversion of some – Nehemiah Goreh, and Pandita Ramabai – is very interesting. His correspondences with K. C. Sen show that he does encourage conversion, warning however that it needs to be done with complete conviction.\footnote{Kaushik Bagchi, Orientalism without Colonialism: Three Nineteenth Cnetury German Indologists and India, unpublished thesis, Ohio State University, 1996.} Rather than interpreting this as a mere question of faith, one could situate this in the context of the forms that European nationalisms were beginning to assume, in which the identification of religion with nation and language
was being consolidated. It would mean that even if Mueller stood somewhere between the Sanskritists on the one hand and advocates of race science and orientalists on the other, a sense of a superior culture sustains itself throughout his work, reaffirming the lasting associations of language with race, religion and nation.

The Aryan Man: Perpetual Opposites

Mueller’s historicisation of world religions and his quest for the earliest roots of human thought, lead in the concept of the ‘Aryan man’. In describing the linguistic protagonists of his theme, he says that the “principal actors in that great drama, which we call the history of the world”, are “the Aryan and the Semitic” races. He attributes the discovery of a common heritage between all “Aryan” peoples to the comparative study of languages, and says that it has practically enabled us to reach beyond the scope of all documented history, to a time “when the soil of Europe had not been trodden by either Celts, Germans, Slavonians, Romans or Greeks.” He proceeds to conjecture on the nature of the dispersal of this originating group. While what he calls the Northern Aryans constitutes this major trend, there was a courageous lot that chose to take a different direction. These were the Southern branch of the Aryan family, “the Brahminic Aryas of India and the Zoroastrians of Iran”. That the Southern aryas shared the same home as that of the Greeks, Italians, Slavonians, Germans, and Celts, - separate from the ancestors of the Semitic and the Turanian races - is to be established according to the evidence of language. He concludes, that the “Hindu” was the last to leave his common ancestral home because

“in his language and in his grammar, he has preserved something of what seems peculiar to each of the northern dialects singly, as he agrees with the Greek and German where the Greek and German differs from all the rest, and as no other language has carried off so large a share of the common Aryan heirloom – whether roots, grammar, words, mythes, or legends – it is natural to suppose that, though perhaps the eldest brother, the Hindu was the last to leave the central home of the Aryan family.”

90 Science of Religion, p. 53.
92 Ibid, p. 63.
93 Ibid, p. 64.
He then describes the characteristics of both groups after this initial migration. The Northern Aryans who followed a northwesterly direction are the principal nations of northwestern Asia and Europe. His characterisation of both is very interesting and not unlike the view held by a large body of Orientalist thought. He says,

"[T]hey have been the prominent actors of the great drama of history, and have carried to their fullest growth all the elements of active life with which our nature is endowed. They have perfected society and models, and we learn from their literature and works of art the elements of science, the laws of art, and the principles of philosophy. In continual struggle with each other and with Turanian and Semitic races, these Aryan nations have become the rulers of history, and it seems to be their mission to link all parts of the world together by the chains of civilisation, commerce and religion. In a word, they represent the Aryan man in his historical character." 94

The story of the southern Aryans is predictably the opposite. They drove out the "aboriginal inhabitants" of the trans-Himalayan countries, and settled down in the river valleys, undisturbed.

"Left to themselves in a world of their own, without a past, and without a future before them, they had nothing but themselves to ponder on. Struggles there must have been in India also. (...) Yet the inward life of the Hindu was not changed by these convulsions. His mind was like the lotus leaf after a shower of rain has passed over it; his character remained the same, passive, meditative, quiet, and thoughtful. A people of this peculiar stamp were never destined to act a prominent part in the history of the world, nav the exhausting atmosphere of transcendental ideas in which they lived could not but exercise a detrimental influence on the active and moral character of the Indians. Social and political virtues were little cultivated and the ideas of the useful and the beautiful hardly known to them. With all this, however, they had what the Greek was as little capable of imagining as they were of realising the elements of Grecian life. They shut their eyes to this world of outward seeming and activity, to open them fully to the world of thought and rest. The ancient Hindus were a nation of philosophers, such as could nowhere have existed except in India, and even there in early times alone. It is with the Hindu mind as if a seed were placed in a hothouse. It will grow rapidly, its colours will be gorgeous, its perfume rich, its fruits precocious and abundant. But never will it be like the oak growing in wind and weather, and striking its roots into real earth and stretching its branches into real air beneath the stars and the sun of heaven. Both are experiments, the hothouse flower, and the Hindu mind; and as experiments, whether physiological or psychological, both deserve to be studied." 95

He holds the "northern Aryans" as those with a specific role to perform in world history, and with a national character to support. Their southern counterparts, though,

94 Ibid, p. 65.
seem never to have emerged from the world of contemplation, and never able to
contfront the material world; the "Hindu" mind is always and only active in the sphere
of thought, philosophy and religion. Clearly, it is the ancient textual traditions of
these "southern Aryans" that is the ideal tool for proving the hypothesis of a
comparative study of languages and religions, primarily because of its antiquity, and
the state of preservation of its oral and later textual traditions.

The Veda: Back to the Future

Culling from the possibilities presented by these conclusions, Mueller chooses
to go back to what he considers the most ancient text in which one could study the
beginnings of languages of the Aryan world.

"we are by nature Aryan, Indo-European, not Semitic: our spiritual kith and
kin are to be found in India, Persia, Greece, Italy, Germany; not in
Mesopotamia, Egypt, or Palestine. This is a fact that ought to be clearly
perceived, and constantly kept in view, in order to understand the importance
which the Veda has for us, after a lapse of more than three thousand years,
and after ever so many changes in our language, thought and religion."96

Apart from the Veda being such a storehouse of the development of language, it is
also a crucial key to reconstructing the evolution of later religions in the Aryan world.
Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, the two other major religions of the Aryan world,
according to Mueller are best understood after an understanding of the Veda. Just as
the scientific study of languages was possible after the discovery of Sanskrit, "a
scientific study of Aryan religions dates really from the discovery of the Vedas."97
Thus while the Veda represents the "most primitive ... form of Aryan faith", the Zend
Avesta represents the next link, a development further, in its language, and the nature
of faith that it represents. Buddhism, on the other hand, represents a complete break
from the form of theism of the Veda, "a decided antagonism against the established
religion of the Brahmans, denial of the true divinity of the Vedic god, and a
proclamation of new philosophical and social doctrines."98

With this thematic outline of Mueller’s work, I have chosen a set of three lectures from *India: What can it teach us?* for a closer look at his vision of the relevance of India to Europe. These lectures are significant because they were addressed to candidates preparing for the civil services examinations in Britain, to assume office under the colonial state in India. This selection is quite representative of his historicisation of the sources available to him, in a way that constructs a panoramic view of a golden past, along the way introducing a racialised interpretation of Indian history: all history is neatly divided into a before and an after the arrival of the ‘marauders’ who came and took the subcontinent by force. Contemporary Indian society interpreted solely in that historical framework, an idea that gradually became central to Indian historiography as well. The following rather lengthy analysis of the three lectures seemed important because these lectures in fact express ideas that we have begun to recognise as highly disturbing.

*India—What can it teach us?:
A ‘Golden Past’ for the Future of Indian History*

Max Mueller delivered a series of lectures entitled “India—What can it teach us?” at Cambridge in 1882. The first lecture set out to deal with the commonly held belief that for a British civil servant or administrator, being in India was like being in exile, and that India was far removed “from the living stream of thoughts and interests which carries us along in England and in other countries of Europe.” He systematically attacked such prejudice by creating a picture of the linguistic and historical kinship between the Greek and Sanskrit civilizations. In his opinion, a universal history would be inadequate without “...our nearest intellectual relatives, the Aryas of India, the framers of the most wonderful language, Sanskrit.” Max Mueller says that the function of history is to explain our lives as they are, “...but what history has to teach us before all and everything, is our own antecedents, our own ancestors, our own descent.” He developed the idea of linguistic and historical kinship, arguing that Sanskrit is a part of England’s own history, and describing its

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100 Ibid., p 50
101 Ibid., pp 9-10
102 Ibid., p. 11.
antiquity and the excellent preservation of texts handed down from generation to generation. To understand Sanskrit is to understand that we are products of a prolonged and historical process. As an interesting hypothetical example he asked how Americans, who had no knowledge of their English origins, would feel to discover some fragments of 7th century English. As he said,

"...this is not all yet that a study of Sanskrit and other Aryan languages has done for us. It has not only widened our views of man, and taught us to embrace millions of strangers and barbarians as members of one family, but it has imparted to the whole ancient history of man a reality which it never possessed before."103

The second lecture, called "Character of the Hindus," addressed some common prejudices held by colonial administrators and those who had been in India as part of the colonial bureaucracy. A primary accusation leveled at India and its people was that Hindus lacked respect for the truth. He addressed the feeling that apparently persisted among civil service aspirants that staying in India is "a kind of moral exile, and (...) the Hindus (...) an inferior race."104 He criticized these ideas, saying that such generalizations are indefensible, especially in these days of systematic reasoning. He put a great deal of the blame for these prejudices on Mill’s *History of British India* which attributed the “backwardness” of India to its lack of a legal system and the existence of despotism, a favorite European generalization about Asia.

To counter these allegations, he created an image of the rustic simplicity of village communities, which he considered to be a fundamental political unit. “To the ordinary Hindu, I mean to ninety-nine in every hundred, the village was his world, and the sphere of public opinion, with its beneficial influences on individuals, seldom extended beyond the horizon of his village.”105 At the same time he narrates engaging tales from the *Katha Upanishad*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* to demonstrate the complexity of moral codes and ideals of truth in an ancient past.106 He made this

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103 Ibid., p. 19.
104 Ibid, p 23.
106 The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are post-Vedic epic narratives with many not-so-canonical and popular versions. The *Ramayana* has been especially well researched for a variety of its version, of which, however, have been marginalized for the Sanskrit Valmiki *Ramayan*. Cf. Paula Richman, ed, *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, for an very interesting collection of essays which analyse the numerous Ramayanas –
point forcefully and showed a degree of ambivalence regarding a later period. "As to
modern times, and I date them from about 1000 after Christ, I can only say this. If
you frighten a child, that child will tell a lie — if you terrorize millions, you must not
be surprised if they try to escape from your fangs."\textsuperscript{107}

The next lecture, "Human Interest in Sanskrit Literature," dealt with the common view

"that the literature of India, and more especially the classical Sanskrit literature,
whatever may be its interest to the scholar and the antiquarian, has little to
teach us which we cannot learn better from other sources, and that at all events
it is of little practical use to young civilians."\textsuperscript{108}

Max Mueller also denounced the colonial state's view that it "absorbed [its students]
in questions of abstruse scholarship or in researches on ancient religion, mythology,
and philosophy."\textsuperscript{109} He began by saying that he would ask each of the candidates to
learn Sanskrit, and learn it well. Although it has been a dead language for over 2000
years, he said, there was a marvelous continuity between the past and the present in
India, and that "Sanskrit may be said to be still the only language that is spoken over
the whole extent of that vast country."\textsuperscript{110} To illustrate this, he told how Buddhist
kings issued edicts in the vernacular, but that "official documents are composed in
Sanskrit in the present day."\textsuperscript{111} And though

"the language of the sacred writings of the Buddhists and Jainas was
borrowed from the vulgar dialects, the literature of India never ceased to be
written in Paninian Sanskrit, while the few exceptions, as for instance, the
use of Prakrit by women and inferior characters in the plays of Kalidasa and
others, are themselves not without an important historical significance."\textsuperscript{112}

At one level, this small set of lectures might seem like a very direct attempt to
set the record straight and show a great deal of respect for India and its people. If we

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid, p 46.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, p 50.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p 50.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p 51.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p 51.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., pp 51-2.
look at it critically and look at its impact, however, we find a very interesting construction of history based on assumptions about tradition and language. His arguments in favor of Sanskrit, not only as a language of remarkable antiquity, but also as a tool for excavating the root of all civilization, are sometimes problematic. For example, in order to 'prove' that Sanskrit was still a living language, he mentions the annotated editions of the *Rigved* were being published by Dayanand Saraswati in Bombay and Allahabad, and the few journals which were published either partly or exclusively in Sanskrit.\textsuperscript{113} He also cited the recitals of Ramayana and Mahabharata in temples, and the fact that there were Brahmins who could still recite the *Rigved* by heart, as well as staged debates in Sanskrit between scholars and reformers, which were a part of an agenda to revive the language and its textual traditions.\textsuperscript{114} Even if Sanskrit was no longer spoken, he felt that it was still the very life and soul of the Aryan and Dravidian languages spoken in India. In philological terms this might have been defensible, but the actual development of "Indian" society into a highly class and caste differentiated society ensured that language was a tool for segregation as well as appropriation of knowledge. Clearly, this meant that Sanskrit, which survived in its earliest stages through the oral and then only through a textual tradition was a language spoken and understood by the elite few.

He then went on to say that the term Sanskrit literature is vague because it actually refers to activity spanning over 3400 years, beginning with the composition of the Vedas. Though it is a vast quantity of work, it definitely represented high literature. And here he said something quite revealing and typical of his approach:

"the true history of the world must always be the history of the few; and as we measure the Himalaya by the height of mount Everest, we must take the true measure of India from the poets of the Veda, the sages of the Upanishads, the founders of the Vedanta and the Sankhya philosophies, and the authors of the oldest law books, and not from the millions who are born and die in their villages, and who have never for one moment been roused out of their drowsy dream of life."\textsuperscript{115}

In this roundabout way, he admitted that much of Sanskrit literature has never been living and national in the sense that Greek and Roman literatures were, and that the

\textsuperscript{113} Dayanand Saraswati, b.1824, founded the Arya Samaj, a strongly revivalist organization with influence that spread in Gujarat and Northern India.

\textsuperscript{114} Incidentally, popular recitals often gave translations and explanations in the vernacular.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p 55, my italics.
canonical texts in Sanskrit were not meant for popular consumption, but for a small elite.

The importance of the Sanskrit language, of Vedic texts and later compositions, has been a matter of great debate for historians in recent centuries. Tracing the history of Sanskrit through these texts has been a tool for analyzing the consolidation of various entrenched interests and social hierarchies. Historians of ancient India, like D.D. Kosambi contend that "the question of Sanskrit language and culture is rooted in a special position for the Brahmin caste." However, a later period in Vedic literature suggests that while the Rigvedic people were primarily pastoral and nomadic, the same society had moved from "pastoralism to a peasant society with the beginnings of a city-life." The evidence of non-Aryan phonetics, not found in other languages derived from Indo-European, further suggests that there was a great intermingling with the indigenous population. These are historical and linguistic indicators of the fact that society had evolved more complex structures, and the problem with Mueller's interpretation is that it ignores later historical developments that are crucial to analyzing the development of a particular language and society. The intermingling and development of the vernacular suggests a cultural development among the people that Mueller is excluding in favor of the 'purity' of Sanskrit as a language. The natural outcome of such an interpretation has more than purely linguistic implications: it fails to acknowledge class divisions inherent even to the ancient past that is looked upon as a model for contemporary society.

We must also critically evaluate the implications of Max Mueller's periodization of Sanskrit literature into two phases, that preceding the Turanian invasion and that following it. As he said, "the former comprises the Vedic literature and the ancient literature of Buddhism, and the latter all the rest." This "rest" he places between the first century BC and the third century AD, and he characterizes it as a blank in Brahminical literature. What followed, he said, did not compare with Vedic literature. He did count the literature of the "Buddhistic religions" with Vedic literature, but could not comment on them in the lectures. About the later phase in the history of Sanskrit literature, he said that there was a laxity, which was broken only

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118 Ibid, p 55.
by the study of the Science of Language, which evolved through the efforts of European scholars when they began a thorough examination of Vedic texts.

While one cannot miss the liberal-humanist attitude that seems to constantly guard against prejudice and the framework of uncompromising science, it is important to note that he restricted himself entirely to the "high road" of the Vedas and the Upanishads. A later body of literature, which reflected a different social reality did not compare in his eyes with early Vedic writings. Texts following the Turanian invasion are for him "modern and artificial," and those preceding it "ancient and natural." He supposed that the Northern conquerors were not believers in the Veda, and might have made some kind of "compromise with Buddhism" which had "already considerably shaken the power and influence of the old Brahmanic hierarchy." After this point, he felt, the "laxity" set in; with the arrival of "war-like races," which might be a reference to tribes from central Asia — literary men suffered from the displacement of their patrons, the Rajahs. Interestingly, he completely ignored the way these post-Vedic texts mirror the social reality of hierarchies in flux. Asked what there is in ancient Sanskrit literature that cannot be found elsewhere, he responded: "My answer is, we find there the Aryan man, whom we know in his various characters, as Greek, Roman, German, Celt, and Slav, in an entirely new character." His sketch of villages as fundamental political units was an alternative to the "Oriental despotism" of Mill. Such a construction suggests a seamless continuity between the ancient past and present, and presents ancient India as a kind of hidden ideal. For Max Mueller, the Rigved was valuable for what it said about the origin of ancient religions independent of individual prophets. He assumed that the Rigved was a testimony to the earliest developments in the history of man, because religion was an all-absorbing interest to the people of India. “It

119 Ibid., p 57.
120 Ibid., p. 57.
121 One might take the example of the texts of Kalidasa, in which characters on lower rungs of the caste, class and gender hierarchy do not speak Sanskrit.
122 Ibid., p. 61.
123 For him, the instance of close and positive interactions between Englishmen and their contemporary "Hindus" and sometimes even deep friendships are the ideal. He recommends Col. Sleeman’s ‘Rambles and recollections of an Indian Official, (published 1844, written 1835-36), who he thinks is an authority on 'Indian character' because “Col. Sleeman saw India, where alone the true India can be seen, namely in the village communities,” which Sleeman calls 'communes'. Ibid., p. 28. It should be noted, that Sleeman was in charge of the initiatives of the colonial state against the Thuggies.
124 One can infer this to be a reference to Islam.
includes not only worship and prayer, but what we call philosophy, morality, law, and government, all was pervaded by religion."  

Mueller’s emphasis on ‘continuity’ belies the history of cultural diversity, political conflict and evolving class differentiation.

By repeatedly invoking a glorious past of Vedic times and Sanskrit as the mirror, which carried its message, Max Mueller left little space for the contemporary reality of the people he was describing. He was aware that both the history and the language of that history were the legacy of a small elite, yet his narrative left out the whole story of conflict between the oppressive order that this legacy created and those who subverted it. Both Islam and Buddhism provided avenues for rejecting the repressive practices of a Hindu elite and of a necessarily oppressive caste system. These influences also created a highly synthetic culture, which received scant mention in Mueller’s conception of history. This synthetic culture, which produced many lasting linguistic and literary landmarks, was considered by Mueller to be a corruption of a ‘pure’ tradition. As mentioned before, India at the time witnessed growing discontent with this past, and questions of history, language, and religious identities began to be hotly debated. Max Mueller’s focus on India’s glorious past can only be explained by his total dependence on textual traditions and textual sources. Even if we accept that this was often the limitation of philology, it should be clear that he read a great deal more into this material than linguistic science purported: Sanskrit became an icon of what a people and a culture should be, rather than an index of the dynamic nature of any evolving society. The experience of colonialism had pushed people to look at history as an ideological tool, and interpretations became crucial in charting the course of the future of a people. In such a context, Max Mueller’s construction of an “Aryan man” with the Rigved as the pinnacle of achievement becomes the tool enabling politicians to speak of an ancient “Hindu” polity with Sanskrit as its essential linguistic manifestation.

In sum, Max Mueller’s work discovers the primeval past – Urzeit – of the Aryans in the earliest Vedic past. The picture sketched by Herder is tested out through philological research. Max Mueller’s concern – like Schlegel and unlike

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125 Ibid., p. 69.
Herder – is not the prehistory of man in general, but the glorification of the ‘original Aryan race’, and he uses philology to show how they might have been close to the Germans. In the case of his predecessors, the engagement with the orient and with India involved a critique of contemporary religious and political practices in Europe. With max Mueller, there is none of that. In fact, there is a suggestion, that the northern Aryans have a natural political right to rule. He says:

"the Teutonic race, the most vigorous and enterprising of all the members of the Aryan family ... planted new states in the West, and regenerated the effete kingdoms of the East, ... they preached Christianity and at last practiced it by abolishing slavery of body and mind among the slaves of West Indian landholders, and the slaves of Brahminical southerners, until they greeted at last the very homes from which the Aryan family had started...”

He follows in the tradition of a racialised history and maintains the separation of the Semitic peoples. We need to keep in mind that in the face of an insistent race science, which was on the rise in Europe, he was careful to assert the difference between the disciplines, which dealt with either language or ethnology – and by extension race. By the 1850s, he spoke of how people of what he called a ‘Tamulian’ extraction might speak a language descended from Sanskrit, or vice versa, that Brahmins in the Deccan speak Dravidian languages. There are however contradictions in his work on this issue – where he does not quite stick steadily by his own recommendations for the separations of disciplines. He does go into an analysis of ethnological facts of aboriginal races in India as available from the Rigved, a fact that at the time of his first edition of the Rigved did have a considerable currency. Vasudha Dalmia-Lüderitz has pointed out that he belongs to the tradition in which ‘Volk’, religion and language are a coherent unity. In this specifically European

126 Dalmia-Lüderitz, p. 440.
128 Here ‘Tamulian’ means non Aryan; remembering the earlier reference to southern India, where according to Mueller, the Aryans – Brahmans – had adapted by taking on languages of that part of the subcontinent, which had earlier been spoken entirely by the indigenous people, makes this observation clearer. “But although the majority of people who speak Bengali may be of Tamulian extraction, does it follow that the grammar of their language is Tamulian? Or does it follow that the original inhabitants of Asam were Arians, because the language at present spoken in that country is Sanskritik in its grammar?” As quoted in Trautmann, p. 196.
129 It is here that the controversy over whether the term anasa meant a reference to the nose or to something else. Whatever the precise controversy, it is clear that the analysis goes into the physical features of a social – racial – ‘type’. Later the controversial figure to root for the use of ethnographical data churned out by the British state was H. H. Risley. At the heart of such later ethnography is the thesis that social differences among the various heterogeneous peoples in India are racial in character.
framework, the Vedic texts are subjected to a ready interpretation in racial terms, and components of these texts – the passage about the 'nose' in the Rigved – were wrung rather hard for what was finally extracted – a lasting association of caste with race, with a near permanent place for the idea of race in historiography of India.