

Friedrich Schlegel's *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*: A Study

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Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1819)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Schlegel

Abstract

Friedrich Schlegel hails from a prestigious German academic family and was an Indologist like his famous brother August Wilhelm Schlegel who founded the concept of Romanticism in Germany. Sanskrit played a major role in German society in shaping aesthetics and literary styles and helped the new field of study of comparative philology. The Danish government had sent German missionaries to Malabar region and these missionaries took back a lot of knowledge about Tamil Nadu and Kerala, but these early works lost their prominence in German academia. Instead, Sanskrit took over as a leading and influential phenomenon. This paper tries to study Friedrich Schlegel's important treatise "On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians" and understand if there are any reasons for the shift from Malabar languages to Sanskrit.

Keywords: Friedrich Schlegel, Sanskrit, Germany, Malabar

Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) can be regarded as a German literary critic and a poet and philosopher. Early German Romanticism’s philosophical importance can now be reconsidered by studying the works of him. He was the youngest of five sons born in Hanover into a culturally prominent literary family. His father, Johann Adolf Schlegel, was a clergyman and wrote literary works; his uncle, Johann Elias, wrote dramas and was a literary critic; and his elder brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel translated Shakespeare’s plays into German and also emerged as a leading literary critic. In 1804 Schlegel developed an interest in the study of Sanskrit and Hindu texts. Schlegel’s work as explained in the long essay “On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians” studied the links between Sanskrit and the Indo-European languages, and developed the study of comparative grammar, a term which Schlegel himself coined in the text. The study of Hindu metaphysics created a shift in his religious thought, and he converted to Catholicism in April 1808, scholars argue. (Speight)

The Danish King Frederick IV acquired a colony for the Danish settlements in Tranquebar. The Danish East India Trading Company was gaining momentum in and around the place. Its Directors in Copenhagen wanted to get more profits through trading activities. The king also wanted to spread protestantism and Halle in Germany supplied missionaries, thanks to the zealous Pastor Prof. Francke to be sent to South India. All these missionaries, though Germans by birth, came to be called the Royal Danish Missionaries. The Missions Kollegium in Copenhagen failed to give these early German missionaries enough protection in the Danish colony Tranquebar. (Mohanavelu 26)

Mohanavelu's doctoral research was on the investigation of the “origin of German Indology” and he traced its “development over the past three centuries in a particular branch - German Tamilology” (*German Tamilology* by C.S. Mohanavelu, Saiva Siddhanta, Chennai, 1993). He believes that “although German Indology” is historically associated with German Jesuit Heinrich Roth (1620-1668) “significant German interest in Indology” can be located from the year “1706, when Ziegenbalg arrived at Tranquebar, (Tarangampadi in Tamil) with a Royal Danish order to propagate the Gospel among the "Malabarians", as Tamils were known in Europe in those days” (Viswanathan).

After a ship voyage lasting more than six months, the two theologians Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) and Heinrich Plütschau (1677–1747) arrived in Tranquebar (today: Tharangambadi), the main bastion of the Danish colonies in Southeast India on 6 June, 1706. Their arrival marked the beginning of an intercultural dialogue that carried on into the nineteenth century between the European representatives of the first Protestant mission in Copenhagen, Halle and

London and the people living in the South Indian kingdom of Tanjore. The mission undertaking was funded by the Danish Crown, but it received guidance and support from the educational and social institutions in Halle named after the pastor and professor of theology, August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), who had established them. The mission was later also supported by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in London. Thus, the mission in Tranquebar is called the Danish-Halle mission or the Danish-English-Halle mission. (MIDA archival entry)

Germany absorbed these missionary and colonial interactions' inferences resulting in new thought processes and approaches. A century of cultural transactions between South India and later North India brought about seminal changes in thinking traditions of German academia. We notice the shift in Friedrich Schlegel's thought, and also notice his ambiguity in approaching Indian metaphysics and philosophy. He shifts from Protestantism to Catholicism after he intensely interacts with Indian writings. He is unable to interpret the concept of emanation from an autonomous position and ends up interpreting it as caught within the framework of time and space.

“On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians” was written in 1808. Schlegel says that he would prefer “to predict that the Indian study” would influence “European intelligence” and pays tribute to the German missionaries in India on Malabar mission who “devoted their talents to the cultivation of Indian literature.” He discusses Heinrich Noth (1620 -1668) who studied Sanskrit in 1664 to argue with Indian scholars (Schlegel 427). The European missionaries took back with them Indian elite learning systems and mythologies. The German scholars slowly began identifying India with one written classical language - Sanskrit. Schlegel mentions the Jesuit Ernst Hanxleden who visited India in 1699 and says that he “produced many works in prose and verse in the old Indian (the Gronthon), and the common language (the Malabar), besides compiling dictionaries and grammars” (Schlegel 428).

Johann Ernst Hanxleden (1681-1732) was known as Arnos Pathiri in Kerala. He was a German Jesuit priest and missionary. The people knew him as a “Malayalam and Sanskrit poet, grammarian, lexicographer, and philologist” and “lived in India for most part of his life” and learnt Sanskrit and Malayalam languages and wrote “Puthen Pana,” a poem on the life of Jesus Christ. He also wrote “Malayalam–Portuguese Dictionary, the first dictionary in Malayalam” and also wrote “two linguistic treatises, Malayalavyakaranam and Sidharoopam” He also learnt Syriac, Portuguese and Tamil.” Kerala has celebrated his missionary and linguistic work in many books: *Arnos Pathiri - a Biography* by A. Adappur; *Arnos Pathiri* by Mathew Ulakamthara; *Arnos Pathiri - Jeevacharithram* by N. K. Jos and *Arnos Padri* by C. K. Mattam. “The church and his home in Velur have been declared as a protected monument by the Government of Kerala” Records tell us that he was “the vicar of the main church in Malabar” and “in 1712 he built the Velur Forane Church.” From 1729 he moved around “Velur, Sampaloor, Palayoor and Pazhuvil” and “at

Pazhuvil he suffered a snake bite” and died “on March 20, 1732, at the age of 51.” (Indian Christians)

The Christian missionaries looked beyond their horizons of theological thinking and extended their learning to philology and comparative mythologies and literature. Sanskrit as a language began to be identified with refinement, culture, civilization and education, and began to represent Indian civilization:

Certain German scholars’ secular approach to studying Sanskrit in late 18th and early and middle 19th century Europe influenced the establishment of the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit at Harvard. This influence contrasted it with some English scholars’ religious concerns. While these English scholars were attempting to aid in the Christian conversion of the Hindus, those German scholars were leading the academy into comparative philology. The establishing of the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford, the German dominion of the Sanskrit teaching professoriate in the Continent, and the German mentorship of early American scholars interested in the study of India attested to this interplay between a German secular approach and an English religious concern with and to the study of Sanskrit. (De Sena)

Scholars argue that Germany did not have imperialist goals in India and hence created great oriental scholars like Franz Bopp and August Wilhelm Von Schlegel who perceived Sanskrit with Romantic fascination and understood its philological possibilities. Alexander Hamilton wrote one of these early romantic works to influence the German scholars, “On the Speech and Wisdom of the Indians.” Hamilton had taught August Wilhelm Von Schlegel and Franz Bopp who held the first chair of Sanskrit at the University of Berlin, and we have to remember that Max Mueller was Bopp’s student (De Sena). Franz Bopp established Sanskrit as a prime player in the comparative study of Indo-European languages and its related study of linguistics and developed a technique of language analysis. His scholarly treatise “Comparative Grammar of Sanskrit, Zend, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Old Slavic, Gothic, and German” was a great contribution to comparative linguistics and it studied languages and established a strong link between Asia and Europe. The connection between the East and the West developed academic roots through these renowned oriental scholars and Friedrich Schlegel remembers Hamilton with respect in his preface to “On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians”: “I am indebted to the friendship of Mr. Alexander Hamilton, a member of the British Society of Calcutta, and at present professor of the Persian and Indian dialects in London, who favoured me with personal instruction during the spring of 1803-1804” (Schlegel 425).

The vestiges of many valuable works of his are still to be found in Rome. Paulinus St. Bartholomew, well known by many learned writings on Indian antiquity, frequently refers to the

works and manuscript remains of Hanxleden. Schlegel's understanding of India is a consolidation of ideas from south India and North India. He has had the advantage of belonging to a later period and has had the opportunity to assimilate the varied texts of William Jones as well as Hanxleden, representing Bengal and Malabar respectively. Also, his sibling Charles Schlegel who died in Madras also gave him direct inputs about India (Schlegel 428).

Captain Wilford, in the English service, but a German by birth, is well known by his treatises, published in the collection of the British Society of Calcutta. I may also remark that my elder brother, Charles Augustus von Schlegel, who died at Madras on the 9th of September, 1789, having in the latter years of his life made many journeys into the country, and had much intercourse with the natives, had commenced a study of the country, the literature and genius of the Indian people, which was prematurely terminated by his early death. (Schlegel 428)

His brother August Wilhelm von Schlegel, one of the most powerful voices of the German Romantic movement and conceived to be the finest German translator of William Shakespeare, was also an Orientalist just as all the other leading academia. He attacked French Neoclassical theatre, praised Shakespeare, and exalted Romantic drama. These lectures were translated into many languages and helped spread fundamental Romantic ideas throughout Europe. He printed the *Bhagavadgītā* (1823) and *Rāmāyana* (1829) and founded Sanskrit studies in Germany. He started the periodical *Athenäum* (1798–1800) with his brother Friedrich Schlegel, and it became the organ of German Romanticism, which involved the intellectual inputs from Friedrich Schleiermacher and Novalis (Britannica). It is quite interesting to note that he set up a Sanskrit printing press too. German orientalism in its Sanskrit model played a major role in the development of Romanticism in Germany, we can surmise. The academic world was caught up with the Asian metaphysics and languages that travelled through the German missionaries.

Friedrich Schlegel compares Greek with Arabic and argues that there are “far greater numbers of Arabic roots” in Greek language. He says that the “structure and character of the two languages” are “entirely different” and hence “this point of agreement between them is easily overlooked.” He brings in the historical perspective that there was “continual intercourse of the Greeks and Phoenicians” in the past which might have resulted in the absorption of words of one language into another. Similarly, there is “a greater intermixture of Celtic and Cantabrian [Spain] roots.” Also, the “German language” is closely connected “with the Persian distinctly indicates” how languages operate like a tree and branch out radically and separate themselves from their origin. Hence, there are “numerous radical words, common both in the Teutonic and the Turkish languages” which would indicate “the migratory path” of the people concerned (Schlegel 460). Comparative linguistics takes its cue from history and attempts to explain the way languages grow and branch out into different entities. Schlegel traces the historical movement of languages with

the ease of a person who knows many languages along with the history of the people who speak them.

The German respect for Sanskrit which the people identified as “Oriental genius” has been shaped by William Jones who established the affinity between Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, German and Persian. Schlegel says that William Jones “first threw a light on this obscure study” and explains how Jones introduced the advanced intellectual position of India to Europeans and its “surprising discoveries” which have been made in the past “which remarkably illustrate the progress of human intelligence in those ancient times.” Schlegel recommends the study of “Oriental literature” and anticipates “that still more satisfactory results will attend the further prosecution” of research (Schlegel 465). Sanskrit created this impact on German scholars and developed their philological studies into a strong academic discipline during the nineteenth century, and these ideologies of languages slowly spread across Europe and America as scientific studies of languages and comparative philology. Languages came to be interpreted as human institutions and comparative linguistics approached languages from a historical perspective. Studies of ancient languages and their branching out taught humanity how migrations and cultural contacts influenced languages and constantly created new usages and expressions and finally resulted in the creation of new languages.

Along with a study of languages, Schlegel also delves into a study of mythology and argues that it “presents the most complicated structure ever devised by human intellect.” He attempts to examine them too as mythologies show varieties. “The slightest variation of meaning is of importance, and should be considered in its simple individuality, apart from any consideration of time or place,” he says. “Greek and Roman mythology” cannot be treated as one and the same. Scholars have to study the differences “between them to feel that Venus and Aphrodite, Mars (Mavors) and Ares cannot justly be regarded as one and the same divinity.” Once again, he invokes the study of history to interpret the differences in mythologies. Hellenic cities were different from the Roman lifestyle. “How great is the difference between Corinth and Athens, or between Doriern in Sparta and Sicily,” he argues. Each country has “symbolic representation of certain peculiar features in the history” which are represented in their mythologies and “the signification, the idea conveyed by these symbols” can never be transported to another location and will assume a “different aspect” (Schlegel 466). Schlegel’s critique of the merging of Greek and Roman cultures brings in a view that holds that every land has its identity and cannot be destroyed by new assimilations. We can sense the roots of identity politics in this historical understanding of geopolitics. Accordingly, human culture is fixed to a certain location, geographical and social period and can never lose its original identity. Somehow, comparative studies of any type bring in solidification of individual cultures and encourages rigidity of human thought processes, one can surmise.

Perhaps Schlegel senses the route his thinking processes take him and decides to change his route and says, “I must henceforth abandon the system pursued.” He further says that “instead of a comparative analysis of the mythology” he would prefer to conduct a “brief inquiry” on the “character of Oriental genius, its distinctive peculiarities, and the most important stages of its progress.” He wants to confine his “attention to such peculiar points of Indian mythology” (Schlegel 467).

He decides to analyse “the doctrines of the Metempsychosis and of Emanation” from India. To interpret these ideas, he chooses Sanskrit texts. He takes up “the first book of the laws of Manu” which he considers to be “more ancient than any existing records of European literature.” To him this “Oriental system” is “bold and fanciful.” It is highly possible that it can be equated with pantheism, he says (Schlegel 468). Understanding the concept of avtar and seven births throws a challenge to the European mind constructed by its mythologies and religions. It assumes quite naturally that its worldview is a fixed and logical one and the rest of the views are only assumptions. Human mind perceives other systems as fanciful and strange; we can argue.

The problem of viewing that all beings have godliness is that “those who are incorrigibly evil will continue separate and divided throughout eternity.” To Schlegel it is a “dangerous influence on the moral life and character” as thus the eternal distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, set aside, and finally rejected. Rather, he feels that the “doctrine of Emanation” would bring an inference that “all created existences” would be “rather counted unhappy, and the world itself ruined and guilty in its very essence.” He calls such a situation “a state of mournful degradation, sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss.” He dismisses the logic in this system and doesn't want to “enter into a dialectic argument concerning the philosophical incorrectness of this system, for it rests not on any logical basis.” It cannot be proved empirically through demonstration, he argues. To him the Sanskrit system of emanation “wears the character of an arbitrary invention.” It is a “primæval tradition” to him and he feels that “divine origin” has been “ascribed to it” (Schlegel 469). The mind that has accepted the old and the new testaments is not able to accommodate other traditions of interpretations of the world, one can assume. Schlegel views Sanskrit mythology as a system with “rude errors and arbitrary fictions with which this philosophy is everywhere overlaid” and argues that “a fearful and horrible superstition” had “crept into the entire system, profaning and polluting everything it touched, still it cannot be denied that the early Indians possessed a knowledge of the true God” (Schlegel 471).

He infers that the “writings are replete with sentiments and expressions, noble, clear, and severely grand, as deeply conceived and reverentially expressed as in any human language in which men have spoken of their God.” Still he has one more question: “how is it possible to account for the existence of such lofty wisdom in combination with errors so great and numerous?” He says further: “Our astonishment is, perhaps, still more excited, by discovering that a belief in

the immortality of the soul is bound up with the idea of divinity in this most ancient system of superstition, than at the noble purity and simplicity of their conception of God.” He understands that “immortality” was not “a mere probability, deduced gradually, the result of long study and reflection.” It was “a conviction so certain and decided, that the idea of a future life became the ruling motive and impulse of all actions in this.” He sums up saying that “it would be utterly impossible to explain this fact” (Schlegel 472).

I merely suggest the question, whether it can be correct to seek our proofs of the existence of a God in the usual manner, by syllogisms, probabilities based upon natural appearances, or the evidence of internal necessity; for the footsteps of the Deity cannot be recognised in external nature, or the inner consciousness, unless He be already known and acknowledged ; and this consideration, by destroying the simplicity of the original idea, deprives it of all value. I do not here allude to those who assert that the idea of divinity is capable of being deduced from consciousness or internal evidence and the laws of reason; for another power should be evoked in their place, the very idea of which has long been lost. In a word, the Indian doctrine of Emanation, if treated as the offspring of natural reason, is totally inexplicable. (Schlegel 472)

The mythological and religious concept of emanation has to be tested for its logic step by step, in the style of theological hermeneutic arguments of the Christian system. Stendahl argues how “exegesis, or critical interpretation, and hermeneutics, or the science of interpretive principles, of the Bible have been used by both Jews and Christians throughout their histories for various purposes.” Theologians have attempted to discover “the truths and values of the Old and New Testaments by means of various techniques and principles” and attempted also to reach an “unbiased use of exegesis and hermeneutics” (Stendahl).

Schlegel’s hermeneutic analysis ends up considering the system of emanation as “a perverted conception of revealed truth.” He concludes with his fundamental faith in the Jewish and Christian view of the world that “the same glorious Being by whom man was so majestically formed and highly gifted, vouchsafed to the newly created one glance into the mysterious depth of his own existence.” He asks: “how could truths so divinely imparted become involved in the mists of error?” (Schlegel 473) To this question he has an explanation:

Man, if without the gifts of revelation, would occupy a place with other animals in the general plan of creation; perhaps holding the first and highest rank, perhaps, on the contrary, the most intrinsically wild and savage of them all. Without the free operation and comprehension of divine truth, he would soon become debased into a merely blind and senseless instrument. This primitive error, which sprang from

an abuse of the divine gifts, and an eclipsing and misinterpretation of holy wisdom, is clearly to be traced in all the Indian records; and in proportion as our knowledge of this, the most highly cultivated nation of antiquity, becomes more perfect and complete, the influence of error and distorted views will be more clearly and palpably evident. The Indian mythology and philosophy is the first system which was substituted for the pure light of truth: notwithstanding some lingering traces of a holier origin, wild inventions and savage errors everywhere predominate, and an impression of anguish and sorrow, naturally resulting from the first rejection of, and estrangement from, revealed truth. (Schlegel 473)

To Schlegel Sanskrit mythology and philosophy has “holier origins” as well as “error and distorted views.” As the ancient system does not have the gift of revelations it is more savage in nature and primitive to him. Without the support of divine truth, the human system becomes inferior and “debased” and also further becomes a “merely blind and senseless instrument.” His mind has been shaped by his native mythologies and philosophies.

“Revelation to John” is a part of the Christian system that could have been “composed by unknown authors who lived during the last quarter of the 1st century” though scholars say that it could “have been written by an individual named John—who calls himself the servant of Jesus” (Petruzzello).

The copious richness of Indian literature, and the great and valuable assistance that may be afforded by Eastern study in philosophy, ancient history, and philology having been now fully proved, nothing remains except to determine the relative value of Oriental literature generally, as contrasted with European, and to mark the influence which the former has already had, or may hereafter exert, upon the latter. It has, indeed, been the chief object of the present treatise to display the advantages of Oriental study in this respect particularly (Schlegel 515).

Mohanavelu has painstakingly explained how the German missionaries in Tamil Nadu learnt the Tamil medical systems and the later missionaries lived a longer life than the earlier missionaries who died even in their late thirties due to tropical diseases. (Mohanavelu 194)

Thenceforth came special medical missionaries from Germany to study in more technical detail these native medical secrets, till then unknown in Europe. Some of the medical missionaries collected botanical specimens of the herbs and sent them to Halle most probably for the German medical doctors to find out if those plants could be grown in Europe and medicines prepared for the future missionaries to carry with them, when they set sail to Tranquebar. From the very beginning itself, the Germans were trying to know these medical secrets. Ziegenbalg, when he

happened to meet a Malabar physician on the 1st of May, 1708, asked him if he would let him see the palmleaves books containing the medical studies. (Mohanavelu 194)

There are many questions left in our minds when we interpret Friedrich Schlegel: Why is it that the German academia is only talking about Sanskrit? Why is there no loud discussion of Thirukkural? Mohanavelu and other Lutheran scholars are discussing only about Ziegenbalg and not about Hanxleden or others, and one wonders the reasons for the same.

Nitin Mehta, the founder of Indian Cultural Centre, London has subjective opinions that do help to understand Germany's stand on Sanskrit. He says that "Germany has had a special affinity for Indian mythology, literature and philosophy, which can be traced back to the country's interest in Sanskrit" (Mehta) and traces the history of Indian-German academic relationship. In 1791, Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* became popular in Germany. "In fact, so impressed was Goethe with *Shakuntala* that he had decided to learn Sanskrit" and also read other works by Kalidasa. "*Shakuntala* also wooed Johann Goffried Herder (1744- 1803)." German Orientalist Peter von Bohlen translated *The Three Sataks* by Bhartrahari. Mehta says that "Sanskrit continues to be relevant in present-day Germany. The language has enjoyed a great revival in the country, with fourteen universities teaching Sanskrit" and the "Heidelberg University organises Sanskrit speaking courses in Australia, Europe, North America and even in India." He quotes the Danish historian Georg Brandes: "the Germans started to absorb and to utilise the intellectual achievements and the culture of India" (Mehta).

Viswanathan says in his article quoting the German Consulate General in Chennai that "Grammatica Dumulica (1716), a book on Tamil grammar (printed in Halle), by Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1683-1719)" was the first major published Indological work. "This was followed by a number of dictionaries, lexicons and translations of Tamil literary works published by other missionaries." Viswanathan says that these works by the German pioneers did not sustain their reception "that they deserved and soon Sanskrit studies eclipsed Tamil studies in Europe" as the Consul-General said (Viswanathan).

Schlegel's approach to Sanskrit philosophy and his dismissal of Sanskrit metaphysics needs to be analysed further in detailed research. We have to find out if Tamil linguistics helped develop the study of languages in Germany.

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