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Free Associations a Propos of Axel Michaels's Article

Johannes Bronkhorst

When Indologists prepare an edition (preferably a critical edition) or a translation of a text, they can flatter themselves with the idea that their work is done with the utmost rigour and that they do not need outside help. Once the text is there, what follows is far less rigorous. What Indologists do with texts depends to, a large extent, on their judgement or prejudice, and no rigorous method is available any longer.

One of the questions that present themselves concerns the historical reliability of the information contained in the texts. For a long time, Indologists accepted that their texts provided reliable information about early Indian society that could (almost) be taken at face value. They accepted that early Indian society had been Brahmanical, and that deviating movements (primarily Buddhism and Jainism) could not but be protest movements. Only slowly has it become clear that the texts concerned are ideologically inspired and cannot be taken at face value where historical information is concerned.

In other cases, scholars refuse to take texts at face value, apparently for no other reason than that their personal prejudices or inclinations do not like what they find there. It could be argued that the early Buddhist texts have one common theme, endlessly repeated: there is a method that leads to the end of suffering. I have not come across work by any modern scholar who takes this claim at face value; no one even bothers to reject it. It is apparently taken for granted that all those in their right mind have no place for such claims. [Contrast this with the fact that a passing

Johannes Bronkhorst is at the University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland.
E-mail: johannes.bronkhorst@unil.ch

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reference by Plato to Atlantis has given rise to an extensive literature; the idea of a lost continent has apparently more appeal to modern readers.]

In order to be guided by something better than mere prejudice or inclination, how should Indologists proceed? It all depends on the kind of question to which they, or others, seek an answer. For the correct interpretation of, say, a medical text, it may be useful to consult modern medicine; for the correct interpretation of astronomical data, modern astronomy may help. If one wishes to know where the authors of the *R̥gveda* (or their ancestors) came from, help is forthcoming from the study of ancient DNA (e.g. Reich 2018). If one wishes to reject the central claim of the early Buddhist canon, it seems appropriate to base such a rejection on modern psychology (which, as a matter of fact, says little about the issue). Only if one wishes to draw conclusions about ancient Indian society, sociology might be of help. In other words, there is no natural confluence between sociology and Indology. It all depends on the use one wishes to make of the texts.¹

Dumont is not a good example of how sociology and Indology could collaborate. He adopted romantic notions from contemporary Indology to attribute individuality to the renouncers of ancient India (Bronkhorst 1997, 2016: 241–256 (§ III.1)). This was not an enrichment of the sociology of early India, nor did it help Indologists step beyond their prejudices (or dreams). Michaels enumerates other points (e.g. superiority of Brahmins, the central role of purity) where Dumont got it wrong, partly under the influence of Indology.

As an Indologist myself, I am open to the idea that sociology and related disciplines (short: anthropology) may help Indologists to interrogate their texts in more sophisticated and fruitful ways (as in the ‘Ethno-Indology’ proposed by Michaels). The study of surviving practices (sacrifices and so on) may also be helpful. The other way round, I have some doubts regarding the way in which Indology may help anthropology. As the above-mentioned case of Dumont illustrates, the ‘results’ of Indological research may express the prejudices or inclinations of their authors; if so, they are of no use. And if Indologists use theories and approaches borrowed from anthropology to interpret their texts, circularity may become hard to avoid.

¹ Cp. Michaels: ‘The disciplines necessary to understand Indian society and culture must be selected according to research problems and are therefore also more than just one or two’.

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