

## VEDIC STUDIES IN GERMANY

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*Samjñānam naḥ svebhiḥ samjñānamaraṇebhiḥ  
Samjñānamaśvinā yuvamihāsmāsu niyacchatam.*

(Atharvaveda, 7.52.1)

i.e., Let us have concord with our own people,  
and concord with people who are strangers to us;  
O Dual Devas, you both Create between us,  
and the strangers a unity of hearts and minds!

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“If history is to teach us anything, it must teach us that there is continuity which binds together the present and the past, the East and the West”.

The above statement of Max Mueller, which was made in the ‘Last Essay’ of his famous book *India-what can It Teach Us?* is no less topical now than it was then. This appeal to the mankind for strong intellectual ties uniting the known and the unknown, is as old as the Vedas –the verse from Atharvaveda quoted above is a testimony to the fact. It is really a matter of immense gratification that the eternal and universal message of Vedic lore has been a source of sincere academic pursuit for the German scholars for more than past two hundred years or so.

The present paper is just a modest tribute to the zeal and commitment of German Indologists for their pioneering and untiring efforts towards bringing to light the ancient treasures of Indian wisdom. Their erudition, both philologic as well as philosophic, as also their contribution to Sanskrit language, literature and culture is simply unimaginable and immeasurable. It is, therefore, virtually impossible to give an exhaustive and through account of the enormous amount of service rendered by German scholars in the field of Vedic studies. However an effort is being made here to represent a sketchy and selective outline of some of the most significant achievements in this regard compiled from various sources\* mentioned in the bibliography at the end of this paper.

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## II

Ordinarily it is observed that the relations between two countries are rooted in the political considerations or economic equations, leading in turn, to cultural exchanges. But it is remarkable in case of Indo-German relations that they have developed the other way round. It was due to the keen interest in the intellectual quest of India evinced by German scholars during the last two centuries that the mutual exchanges between the two great countries began. The Germans had no share in the material profits which the colonial powers received from their Indian possessions, but the very fact enabled them to direct their attention to the spiritual treasures of India. The same is succinctly stated by a German poet **Heinrich Heine** (1797-1856) in his letter (1821) addressed to August Wilhelm Schlegel as follows:

“As to the study of Sanskrit itself, time alone will tell how useful it may be. Year after year, Portugese, Dutchmen and Englishmen have been dragging home the treasures of India in their big ships; we Germans have been mere onlookers. Yet the spiritual treasures of India shall not escape us.”

Again, Heine has rightly observed in his world-famous book of songs, *Sonnettenkranz* that the Germans set up “factories in the universities for recovering the priceless intellectual treasures of the rich country lying on the banks of the Ganges.”

In his introductory note to the chapter on Germany included in his ‘*Sanskrit and Allied Indological Studies in Europe*’, Dr. V. Raghavan has also highlighted the above idea in following words:

“Though the credit of discovering Sanskrit for the West goes to England and though it was at the feet of French pioneers that the first German Sanskritists like Bopp and Schlegel sat, Germany had taken to Sanskrit studies with such enthusiasm and disinterested love, that outside India, one can say without exaggeration, that it has been a second home of Sanskrit. Before the war there were fourteen full chairs for Sanskrit at German universities, which is something that could not be said of even India; even after the war, there are no less than ten full professorships and some more Sanskrit departments of the second or third order. Max Mueller and Deussen had captured the imagination of India and Bonn had played the role of something like a Benaras to entire Europe. To give an account of German contribution to Sanskrit would be to write the history of Sanskrit Studies in modern times.”

After going through a brief history of Indology in Germany, one can easily comprehend the breadth and depth in the truth conveyed by such statements as follows: “After becoming a seat of Indology in 1818, the city of Bonn was fittingly dubbed: **The German Benaras on the Rhine**.....Such nicknames, which in all likelihood originated in student circles, frequently express a great deal of love and admiration.----In this the nickname of the German Benaras has fully succeeded”. (Leifer, p. 125)

### III

The tradition of Vedic studies in German Indology dates back to the beginning of nineteenth century when **W. Colebrook’s** Essay was first written (1905). Although he was of the opinion that the Veda need not be translated, as it was hardly worth reading. It is also true that the earliest western Sanskritists were more interested in the study of Sanskrit language and had rather neglected Vedic literature. However, it must be admitted that: “The Veda and more particularly the oldest and from many points of view the most important of Vedic texts, the Rigveda, had remained outside the sphere of the pioneer generation of Western Indologists. Its existence was dimly known, but it was yet unaccessible. In India, on the other hand, although the Veda has always been recognized as the unfallible source, the foundation and backbone of Hindu religion, yet in actual practice, what was understood by Veda or *Śruti*, were almost exclusively the Upanishads, and apart from some *mantras* indispensable in ritual, actual knowledge of the Samhitās, particularly of the Rgveda-Samhita, had become restricted to a narrow circle of *śrotriyas* and the role of the Veda in the religious and spiritual life of India in no way corresponded to the fundamental importance attached to it in theory”. (Alsdorf, p. 24) But once the area of Vedic studies picked up; the scholars in the west recognized the inherent worth of Vedic knowledge and started producing several fundamental works.

German scholar **Dr. Freidrich Rosen** (1805-1837) must be credited for the first ever publication of a part of *Rigveda Samhita (first book)*. It was published after Rosen’s death in 1838 in an imperfect state. The text and the Latin translation of the first book were complete, of the notes only a fourth part were in a finished state. This edition was reprinted by the Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York and London in 1968. Rosen studied Sanskrit at Berlin with **Franz Bopp** (1791-1867) and wrote his thesis in 1826 on *Specimen of the Chief Sanskrit Roots*. It was followed a year later by a book *Sanskrit Roots* which is based on root classifications of Sanskrit grammarians. In 1827, Rosen went to Paris and in the same year, was invited to fill the chair of oriental languages at the University College of London. It was there that he got to study the rich treasures of Sanskrit Manuscripts. Rosen never lost sight of his plan to produce something monumental in Sanskrit scholarship. He therefore devoted his spare time to

preparing the text edition and Latin translation of Rigveda. He thought that the character and genius of Indian language and literature could only be understood by tracing them back to the earliest periods, to which the Vedas belong and he conceived the plan to edit and translate the Rigveda. In 1830, he issued his *Rigvedae Specimen*, in which he published seven hymns. He made use of two Rigveda manuscripts and he had Sayana's Commentary at his disposal. He found Panini's grammar and Yaska's etymology useful for the explanation of difficult words. He meant to write a preface on the life and religion of early Vedic period but could not do so due to his early death in 1837.

Thus, after the preliminary attempts at Rigveda studies by Freidrich Rosen, it was left to **Rudolph von Roth** (1821-1895) and to **Freidrich Max Mueller**, (1823-1900) both encouraged by the famous French scholar Eugene Burnouf, to realize the true importance of India's most ancient treasured texts, the Vedas. Max Mueller's widely known and great contribution to Vedic studies provided the necessary textual basis for further researches while Roth's work, though less spectacular in amount, was no less important. (Stietencorn, p. 7) In 1846, three years before the first volume of Max Mueller's edition appeared in the press, Roth had published an important book entitled *On The Literature and History of the Veda*. This book contained three treatises, namely (i) On the Hymns of the Veda (ii) On the Oldest Veda Grammar or the Pratisakhya sutras and (iii) On Historical Events in the Rigveda: Vasistha's fight with Visvamitra. Macdonall has called this an epoch-making work which became the starting point of Vedic research in Germany. It must also be mentioned here that in contrast to W. Colebrook's view quoted above, Roth was of the opinion that the study of Vedas would be of greatest value for Oriental History. Roth also propounded that the Vedic hymns mentioning wars were the older ones while those related to peaceful sacrifices belonged to a later period.

Roth's book was the first attempt to approach the history of ancient India with critical methods of the West and he was the first to glean historical data from the Vedic hymns. This is also to be recognized that in the course of his Vedic interpretation, Roth attached less value to Sayana and other Indian commentators who lived centuries after the hymns were composed, since he believed that there was no continuous tradition of exegesis from Vedic to medieval times. He, however, found Yaska's explanations of difficult Vedic passages very useful and therefore in 1852, he also brought out an edition of Nirukta with valuable elucidations. (Strache Rosen, p. 62)

The most significant step towards Indic studies in Germany was perhaps the publication of seven huge folio volumes of *St. Petersburg Dictionary* prepared by **Otto Boethlingk** (1815 – 1904) and **Rudolph Von Roth** in a short span of 23 years between 1852 and 1875. The first volume appeared in 1855, the seventh in 1875. It has been reprinted and an English translation was also prepared and published in India. Today, even after one and a half century, the work remains unsurpassed and an entirely invaluable tool for Vedic studies.

Roth undertook the task of dealing with the Vedic period and most of the words from the Vedic Literature in *St. Petersburg Dictionary* are from his pen only. Roth was the first to handle the lexicography of Veda and so much of his time and labour was spent in indexing and comparing parallel passages to ascertain meanings. He was afraid that future research in the field would make his share in the dictionary antiquated. But this did not happen till date. To appreciate the full value of this work it should be mentioned that Roth had to find out the meaning of many obscure Vedic words for the first time. In doing this he rejected the testimony of the medieval commentaries and devoting himself exclusively to the original texts, tried to let them speak for themselves. The results of his labours were, and still are, admirable and the fact that Vedic studies acquired so quickly a firm basis from which to proceed, was mainly due to Rudolph Von Roth. Thus “Roth’s contribution to Vedic research was second to none, not even to the first edition of the *Rigveda* that was to immortalize more than anything else the name of the great Max Mueller”. (Alsdorf, p. 24)

Besides the two above-mentioned significant publications, Roth, together with **W.D. Whitney**, edited the *Atharvaveda-Samhitā*, which was published from Berlin in 1856. The work begun by Roth and Whitney was continued by their students Morris Bloomfield and **Richard Garbe** (1857-1927) both of whom edited the *Kashmirian Atharvaveda (Paippalada branch)*. The text was reproduced in 544 plates by chromo-photography from the manuscript available in the University Library in Tubingen, in three volumes. It is worth mentioning here that Roth was perhaps the first Vedic scholar who realized that the *Atharvaveda* was younger than the *Rigveda* on account of its language.

Roth brought out metrical translations of typical Vedic hymns titled *Seventy Hymns of the Rigveda*, together with his two pupils **Karl F. Geldner** (1856-1910) and A. Kaegi. He also contributed several valuable articles to various journals. A few of the most important of his articles treat *Brahma and the Brahmans*, Vol.I of the German Oriental Society (ZDMG); *The Highest gods of the Aryan Nations*, Vol. VI; *Soma*, Vol. XXXV; *The Habitat of the Soma Plant*, Vol. XVII; *The Myth of Soma and the Eagle*, Vol.

XXXVI; *Learned Tradition in Antiquity, Especially in India*, Vol. XXI and *The Orthography of the Veda*, Vol. XLVIII.

As stated above, many of Roth's pupils also worked in the field of Vedic studies. A few among them were well-known Sanskritists and besides collaborating with him, they worked independently too. Geldner's translation of the Rigveda is held to be a standard work even today. His was only the last of three complete translations of Rigveda into German. The other two renderings began to appear in the same year, 1876. One of these was prepared by **Hermann Grassmann** (1809- 1877), a well-known mathematician who undertook the study of Veda as mental recreation. Grassmann also prepared a *Dictionary of the Rigveda* which is an indispensable tool for Vedic researchers even today. The other German translation of Rigveda was published independently by **Alfred Ludwig** (1832–1911), it contained copious notes and therefore proved to be quite useful for Vedic studies in the following period.

#### IV

**Freidrich Max Mueller** is one of the greatest and best known Vedic scholars of Germany who held that Rigveda is the most ancient book of the Āryan family. Max Mueller's contribution to Vedic studies is almost astonishing. It is not without reason that Max Mueller was called the '*Veda Vyasa of Kali Yuga*' by Radhakanta Dev, One of the orthodox Hindu leaders of the last century.

Max Mueller was destined to immortalize himself by publishing the first ever complete text of Rigveda and other Vedic texts. He was just 23 years old when he went to Paris and attended E. Burnouf's classes on the Rigveda: "a new world was opened to me" Max Mueller later wrote in his autobiography. After that, he decided to prepare and publish the complete edition of Rigveda accompanied with the commentary of Sayana. But the greatest difficulty before him was to raise the enormous amount of money required for printing of this voluminous text. In 1846, Max Mueller went to London where the East India Company agreed to bear the expenses of this ambitious project. The first volume was published in 1849 when Max Mueller was only 26 years of age. "The Honourable East India Company was at that time struggling hard against those who wanted that it should be abolished and the government of India taken over by the Crown, as was actually done a few years later in 1858. The Directors of the company sanctioned the money for the publication of the Rigveda and the upkeep of the editor because here was an excellent opportunity to show the world that the Company was not exclusively bent on profit-making and the exploitation of India but that it was a generous patron of learning and culture".

“The first volume of Max Mueller’s edition appeared in 1849, the 6<sup>th</sup> and last in 1874; the row of bulky quarto volumes has been likened to a row of Indian elephants. This printed Rigveda caused a tremendous sensation in India” (Alsdorf, p. 25) since the first ever publication of Rigveda was a literary-scientific event. Some orthodox circles tried to ban it, pretending that a *mleccha* had written it, put their sacred texts for the first time in print and tried to interpret them, but its undeniable superiority over all mss. got established in a short while and after the publication of the sixth volume, “Max Mueller’s work as well as his contribution as editor (he had got among others, Aufrecht, Brunnhofer, Eggeling, Thibaut and Winternitz to collaborate with him) were acclaimed. In India itself, he won support from an unexpected quarter. A circle of Brahmins around Mula Shankara, better known by his monk’s name of Dayanand Saraswati, and his followers founded a reformed community which they called Ārya-Samaj or Community of the Lofty-minded. This Community was founded in 1875, one year after the appearance of Mueller’s “sixth volume”. After having been criticized for so long, the Anglo-German scholar from Oxford was now accorded the honorary title of **Moksha Mula**, Root of Salvation, which is recognized by all Indians to this day. And Max Muller truly was the root which nurtured this new community founded for the purpose of purifying and reviving their religion. Dayanand read Max Muller correctly; he asked for a return to the plain and simple word.” (Leifer, p. 152).

Max Mueller’s Rigveda edition was published at a time when in India, under the impact of Western influences, the movement of Hindu revivalism was just beginning and this made the significance of what he had done immensely greater. He, as it were, helped to give that movement a more solid basis and to furnish it with an effective weapon. “Perhaps it is not too much to say that without Max Muller’s edition of the Rigveda, Dayanand Saraswati’s war cry “Back to the Veda” would not have been raised or at least not raised in the way it was. Dayanand founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, exactly one year after the completion of Max Muller’s Rigveda, and he particularly insisted in going back not to the Upanishads or other late Vedic texts but to the Rigveda as the oldest and most authoritative document of Aryan religion. It may also be added here that apart from Vedic studies the work done by Western, and that is to say primarily by German scholars, was not without significance for religious movements in India and even for the national movement, for, when these Western Indologists unearthed the literary treasures of India, making them accessible to the whole world and bestowing high praise upon them and when they recovered India’s forgotten ancient history from newly deciphered inscriptions and coins, they strengthened India’s self-respect, made Indians proud of their own culture and their glorious past, and helped them to shake off inferiority complexes, in short they helped the Indian genius to reassert itself against the spiritual onslaught of the West”.

(Alsdorf, p. 26). On the other hand, it should also not be forgotten that Max Mueller's contribution to Vedic studies would not have been recognized in the traditional circles of India, had social reformers and enlightened citizens of India like Dayanand not accepted and appreciated the same in unequivocal terms.

Besides the first edition of complete Rigveda text with Sayana's commentary, Max Mueller's chief work in the field of history of religion is the publication of a series of volumes under *The Sacred Books of the East*. The series comprised no lesser than 51 volumes affording ample insight into the Oriental philosophy. In fact, Max Mueller had instigated this work at the International Congress of Orientalists in 1874. He himself contributed the translation of the principal Upanishads, Vedic Hymns and the Dhammapada. Max Mueller also published a *History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* and the *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. In addition to this he delivered several lectures on Indological subjects and these lectures were also published under various headings such as *Chips from a German Workshop* (four volumes), *Lectures on The Science of Language* (fourteen editions), *Science of Language* (two volumes) and *India-What It can teach us?* His *Autobiography: a Fragment* was published in 1901.

Thus, just glancing through the details of Max Mueller's writings, the mind indeed bogs at the capacity for work of a man who was so truly dedicated to his avocation, that no words can pay a befitting tribute to his vast and everlasting contribution to Indology in general and Vedic studies in particular. Still, the following words of an Indian scholar are worth quoting:

“Of all contacts with the west, the most fruitful for India was the contacts with the German Orientalists, in the last century. India benefited a good deal by this. A new outlook on life sprang up in the place of the old one, which had become fossilized for centuries. It was just like a cool, refreshing breeze blowing in a stuffy room. Among those great savants who had contributed so much for this new outlook, none deserves our thanks more than the German scholar Max Mueller”. (A.S.V. Pant in *Voice of Ahimsa*, October, 1956)

German scholars have also worked on the other three Vedas. Of them; *Sāmaveda* was the first to be completely edited and translated in German. **Theodor Benfey** (1809-1881) got it printed as early as 1848. After that the text of *Shukla Yajurveda* was published in 1852-59 by **Albrecht Weber** (1825 -1901). **Leopold von Schroeder** (1851-1921) first prepared the edition of *Krishna Yajurveda Maitrāyaṇīya Samhitā* in two volumes (1881-86) and then of the *Kāthakasamhitā* in four volumes (1900-1910). As already mentioned, the text of the *Atharvaveda* was edited by Rudolph von Roth and W.D. Whitney in 1855-56, and its translation by **Theodor Aufrecht** (1821 -1907) and Albrecht Weber appeared from 1850 onwards in several volumes of the latter's *Indische Studies*, but was not complete.



Besides them, **Julius Grill** (1840-1918?) also translated one hundred songs from the Atharvaveda.

Vedic studies in Germany were not only centred on the editing of texts and their translations, but many German scholars were also focusing on much more detailed research on topics related to Vedic literature. **Hermann Oldenberg** (1854-1920) wrote an important work on the *Religion of the Veda* and his two volumes of exegetical notes on the Rigveda are also a veritable mine of information. Besides this, **Alfred Hillebrandt** (1853-1927) published his challenging *Vedic Mythology* in two volumes and **Heinrich Zimmer** (1890 – 1943) wrote his *Life in Ancient India* wherein he has discussed the social and cultural aspects of everyday life in Vedic India.

Thereafter **Richard Pischel** (1849-1908) published his three volumes entitled *Vedic Studies* in 1889, 1897 and 1901 in collaboration with K. Geldner. Pischel was of the opinion that the Vedas could be understood only by persons who have a profound knowledge of Indian thought of later periods, and he regarded the Indian commentators as indispensable.

Moreover, there are several editions, translations and research works on the Brāhmaṇa texts wherein noted German scholars such as **Martin Haug** (1827 -1876) **Hans Oertel** (1868 -1952), **Sten Konow** (1867 -1948) a Norwegian scholar who often wrote in German have made their mark. **Julius Eggeling** (1842 – 1918), **Willem Caland**, a Dutch scholar who wrote mostly in German (1859 -1932) and **Wilhelm Rau** are also worth mentioning in this regard. Among the German scholars who have worked on the Upaniṣads, **Johannes Hertel** (1872 – 1955), **H. Eduard Roer** (1805 – 1866) **Paul Deussen** (1845 – 1919), and **Herman Jacobi** (1850 – 1937) are significant. It shows that the tradition of Vedic studies in Germany has continued from the time of the first edition of Rigveda and later scholars like **Paul Theime**, **Walter Wilst** and **Karl Hoffmann** have sustained interest in this field.

## V

In more recent times, several German scholars have made Vedic gods subjects of their monographs: Although **Heinrich Luder's** (1869-1943) major work on the Vedic deity Varuṇa remained incomplete till the time of his death, yet his worthy pupil **Ludwig Alsdorf** has edited in two volumes those parts of the manuscript, (Gottingen, 1951-59.) which had escaped the vicissitudes of war and were available. **Paul Theime** has worked on *Mitra* and *Aryaman*, New Heaven, Conn. 1957. **H. P Schmidt** on *Brhaspati* and *Indra*, Wiesbaden, 1968. Further, the problem of the age of Veda has also caught the attention of later scholars and no consensus has been arrived at so far. Accordingly **W. Wuest** of Muenchen has discussed *History of Style and Chronology of the Veda* and his study has been published from Leipzig, 1926. Besides, **Paul Thieme's** *Studies in the Etymology and Interpretation of the Rigveda* has been published from Halle, in 1949.

To conclude, it must be emphasized again that the above brief delineation is in no way perfect and systematic since there will still be many more names as well as works which might have escaped the attention of the compiler. This small write-up is just meant to give a glimpse of the rich and vast, continuous and far-reaching contribution of German scholars to the field of Vedic studies. If this article is able to generate any amount of interest in the minds of young Indian scholars to undertake a comprehensive, detailed account of Vedic studies in Germany, then it will really be a rewarding exercise and a fitting tribute to the toiling spirit of German Indologists.

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