

Soviet Indology and the Rise of “Insurgent Philology”/ *A Indologia Soviética e a ascensão da “filologia insurgente”*

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the development of “insurgent philology” in early Soviet Russia and its relationship to Oriental Studies. After some general historical and theoretical points, the character of early Soviet Indology is discussed, with particular reference to the work of F. I. Shcherbatskoi and the influence of neo-Kantianism. A discussion of changes in Indology in the early USSR follows, with particular attention given to A. P. Barannikov. Buddhologist and member of the “Bakhtin Circle,” M. I. Tubianskii is considered as a transitional figure, with particular reference to his work on Rabindranath Tagore. Connections with the emergence of an “insurgent” trend among anti-caste intellectuals (Phule, Thass, Ambedkar) are made and some final reflections on the relevance of Bakhtin’s work to this field are given.

KEYWORDS: Philology; Indology; Orientalism; USSR; Marxism

RESUMO

O artigo discute o desenvolvimento da “filologia insurgente” no início da Rússia Soviética e sua relação com os Estudos Orientais. Após alguns pontos históricos e teóricos gerais, discute-se o caráter da Indologia soviética inicial, com referência especial ao trabalho de F. I. Shcherbatskoi e à influência do neokantianismo. Em seguida, discutem-se as mudanças na Indologia no início da URSS, com atenção especial para A. P. Barannikov. O budologista e membro do “Círculo de Bakhtin”, M. I. Tubianskii, é considerado uma figura de transição, com referência especial ao seu trabalho sobre Rabindranath Tagore. São feitas conexões com o surgimento de uma tendência “insurgente” entre os intelectuais anticastas (Phule, Thass, Ambedkar) e são apresentadas algumas reflexões finais sobre a relevância do trabalho de Bakhtin para esse campo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Filologia; Indologia; Orientalismo; URSS; Marxismo

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The Russian Revolutions of 1917 coincided with the disciplinary fragmentation of philology. The near simultaneous publication of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* [Course of General Linguistics] and Shklovskii's *Iskusstvo kak priem* [Art as Device] in 1916, which became foundational texts of linguistics and literary studies respectively, sundered a capacious field which had encompassed all studies, empirical, historical and comparative, of language, of specific languages, and of texts. The newly emerging disciplines did not, however study language and literature as such, but constructed object domains termed *langue*, language viewed *as if* a synchronic system and *literaturnost'* [literariness], the quality that made a given work appear literary. The methodological clarity these moves represented were indeed important and facilitated modes of analysis that resulted in epistemic progress, but as so often, the constructed object of knowledge was often reified, and the validity of holistic and multidimensional approaches that did not correspond to the patchwork of emerging disciplines was rejected. Once the new disciplines were institutionalised their foundational ideas were assumed rather than interrogated and the superseded paradigm was consigned to the dustbin of history, where caricatures and oversimplifications lay unchallenged. As Turner (2000, p. ix) notes, philology was soon viewed by practitioners of the new disciplines either as "simpleminded," or as "the archetype of crabbed, dry-as-dust, barren, and by and large pointless academic knowledge."

It would be unwise to deny that this characterisation did indeed correspond, to some extent, to certain trends within philology. Nor indeed can we challenge the now well-established view that the principles of generalisation and conceptualisation that dominated Indo-European philology in particular were deeply compromised by its entanglement with colonialism. Cohn (1996, pp. 16-56) and Ahmed (2018) have made a strong case that Indo-European philology played a crucial role in subordinating Brahmin Pandits to colonial administration through the production of a composite and abstract "Hindu law." Another side to this story is, however, that philology also provided a medium through which collaborating Pandits could secure privilege and cultural authority in the new colonial framework (Mani, 2015; Kochhar, 2022). The problem lies elsewhere, in overgeneralising from specific instances or types of philological work and mistaking it for the philological approach in general. One might legitimately ask whether the salience of philological work in assisting the co-option of key sections of the colonised elite and

consolidating colonial rule also enabled it to be reoriented and restructured to undermine the legitimacy of that elite and the rule they enabled.

As Timothy Brennan (2014, p. 10) notes, at its most fundamental level, philology involves “a deliberately generalist understanding of language and literature – a theory of the social that is reliant on a theory of reading based on evidence, correspondence, and evaluation, situating authors in their motives and times.” Such an approach is certainly not reducible to any of the particular trends within the capacious field of philology, which, as Brennan shows, includes some important tendencies fundamentally hostile both to pedantry and colonialism. This builds on the prison writings of Antonio Gramsci (1975, pp. 1428-1429), for whom philology “is the methodological expression of the importance of particular facts understood as definite and specific ‘individualities’” and should not be usurped by theories that extrapolate according to pre-established schemata. Instead, the same attention to “history [...] in its infinite variety and multiplicity” that gives rise to philology should also give rise to “philosophy understood as a general methodology of history.”¹

The current article explores the Russian and Soviet philology of the early twentieth century with particular reference to India. We show that Russian thinkers developed a perspective that valued the scholarship and perspectives of indigenous researchers and used this to challenge the dominant trends within European Indology. While before the Revolution Russian Indologists anticipated important aspects of postcolonial theory, it is in the early Soviet period that Oriental Studies moved beyond this to develop an “insurgent philology” that undermined the dichotomy of West and East, revealing complex dynamics of collaboration and opposition within Indian society and culture. This, we argue, converged with a radical critique within India that went well beyond the limits of nationalism and rewards careful study today.

Philology, “Philologism” and Philosophy

The crucial importance of philology in the sense discussed above must necessarily be distinguished from “philologism,” the over-literal rendering of terms from one

¹ Cited in English in Buttigieg (1990, p. 76).

language, culture or tradition to another, coupled with a narrowly contemporaneous understanding of the meaning of a historical source. One problem with such approaches is that they often result in misleading formulations that give an entirely false impression of the historical source being discussed as logically deficient or mystical. Philologism thus legitimises, an “orientalist” perception of non-European cultures, as we can see in the argument of Belgian Buddhist Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869-1938) that the “genuine methods of the Indian thought” are either “genial but incoherent effusions” or “pedantic categories” – the “matrkas” (compilations of technical terms) – and that this “tradition must be squeezed through a filter if one wants coherent theories” (Poussin, 1906, p. 944). Similarly, the British Indologist Berriedale Keith (1931, pp. 393, 399) regarded it “really impracticable to discover with any precision the doctrine which in fact he [Buddha] expounded” because it had a “confused and popular character” wholly corresponding to the milieu in which it appeared. Any “metaphysical subtlety” that might be identified in Buddhist doctrines was the product of “later scholasticism,” “in large measure far removed from his [Buddha’s] mode of thought” (Berriedale Keith, 1931, p. 403). For Berriedale Keith, as was common among European Indologists of the time, the letter of most ancient texts is regarded as most authoritative, while subsequent “native” interpretations and traditions were marginalised. Where reliance on “native” intellectuals, such as the Brahman Pandits, who facilitated the European “discovery” of the Vedas, was unavoidable, their interpretations needed to be regarded with suspicion, and the methods of comparative philology must prevail.

In an important study Vera Tolz (2011, pp. 101-109) has outlined the ways in which late Imperial and early Soviet Buddhistologists developed a very different approach to Buddhism, understood as a living tradition that had spread through Tibet and Mongolia and into Siberia. Consultation with practicing Buriat lamas, ethnographic study of Buddhist communities and the promotion of indigenous scholars culminated, in 1927, in the establishment of a short-lived Institute of Buddhist Culture in St Petersburg. The person most systematically to promote such perspectives was the Russian-Soviet Buddhistologist Fedor I. Shcherbatskoi (aka Theodor Stcherbatsky) who, in addition to an extensive philological training under Johann Georg Bühler (1837-1898) from the University of Vienna and Hermann Jacobi (1850-1937) from Bonn, had attended lectures by the leading Russian neo-Kantian philosopher Aleksandr Vvedenskii (1856-1925). As

well as endorsing his teachers' reading of ancient Indian texts through their unusually positive reception of the contributions of Brahmin Pandits, Shcherbatskoi sought to ground an *understanding* of Buddhism on a philosophical basis. Unlike his teachers, however, he refused to derive the conceptual framework of Buddhism from Brahmanism and sought to establish the coherence of Buddhist philosophy, thus fracturing the idea of India as a unified cultural space common to Brahmanism and colonial Indology.

Shcherbatskoi presented Vvedenskii with a copy of his major study *Teoriia poznaniia i logika po ucheniiu pozdneishikh buddistov* (Theory of Knowledge and Logic According to the Doctrine of the Later Buddhists 1903-1909) in which he argued against literal translation of an essentially metaphorical exposition in Sanskrit texts and for the "hypothetical reconstruction of the philosophical system" with the help of the "local tradition" of commentary (Shcherbatskoi, 1995, vol. 1, pp. 56-57). His attempts to convince Vvedenskii of the validity of comparisons between the logical works of later Buddhist Scholiasts and German idealist philosophers, partly by translating Buddhist logic into the nomenclature of German idealism, failed, but there was a precedent in the work of the Marburg neo-Kantian who was perhaps the main influence on Vvedenskii's academic philosophy: Hermann Cohen (Dudyshkin, 2019).

Cohen had defended the philosophical unity of Judaic ethics against Spinoza's more narrowly philological reading, arguing the accomplishments of philological work on the canon were important, but only preliminary (Billet, 2024; Zank, 2000, pp. 219-222). The fundamental task of historians of philosophy was to grasp the "*Grundgedanken*," the "basic thought," that is preserved and passed from generation to generation. A historical source might be lexically and generically varied, fragmentary, and even include incidental statements that are inconsistent with the *Grundgedanken*. These are related to ephemeral conditions, which can be identified and described philologically. But, Cohen insisted, the "historian shall be a philosopher" whose task is to "represent the continuous connection of the philosophical problems [in a given source] within the whole of human culture" (Zank, 2000, p. 220). In other words, studying the subsequent history of a source enables the philosopher to identify the profound, universal insights that transcend the limitations of the historical moment in which a text was produced. In terms of Cohen's more general philosophy, the danger of a narrowly philological approach is that it becomes "dominated by the historical urge" and is soon

“fully satisfied by gratifying it,” in time becoming “less touched by the question: What *will* be? And even less by the more urgent: What *ought* to be?” (cited in Zank, 2000, p. 222). As Zank (2000, p. 222) summarises Cohen’s argument, “[t]he question ‘what ought to be?’ is the hermeneutic interest guiding a proper understanding of the historical document.”

Tubianskii, Tagore and Vishnuism

While Shcherbatskoi’s encounter with Cohen’s ideas may have been indirect, his Jewish student Mikhail Tubianskii was steeped in Marburg neo-Kantianism and on graduation from the historic-philological faculty of Petrograd University in 1919 he even prepared a volume of Cohen’s work in Russian translation.² In 1920 he also wrote a distinctly Cohenite work on the function of myth in Plato’s philosophy, presenting Plato’s Socrates as the first point at which the power of tradition is recognised as a source of truth rather than, as with the pre-Socratic philosophers, arguing their insights came from direct experience and individual thought.³ Philosophy, he argued, now must become a “philosophy of life and at the same time a philosophy of the historical process.”⁴ The same year he began working with Shcherbatskoi at the Asiatic Museum of the Academy of Sciences, then the main Institute of Oriental studies in the USSR, working on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, to which he applied Cohen’s philosophical approach.⁵ Between 1924 and 1926 Tubianskii attended meetings of what is now generally called the “Bakhtin Circle,” which had been established by, and at the time remained in close contact with, one of Cohen’s later students, Matvei Kagan (1889-1937). From 1920 Tubianskii also established the teaching of modern Bengali at the Central Institute of Living Eastern languages in Petrograd and he became the USSR’s leading scholar in on the work of the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), whose ethical vision and critique of the acquisitive drive of European capitalism and of nationalism he sought to foreground.

² AV 53/1/32/3-10. On Tubianskii’s intellectual trajectory see Brandist (2015).

³ AV 53/1/36/15.

⁴ AV 53/1/36/14.

⁵ AV 53/1/46.

Tubianskii presented Tagore's ideas as a development of the late and post-Vedic philosophical and religious texts, the *Upanishads*, and through Vishnuism, the cult of Vishnu, which had assimilated various folk deities into a single canon as *avatars* of the God Vishnu and thus approached monotheism. This assimilation established what Cohen had called the "unity of the cultural consciousness," the unity of reason in its different directions, but not subsumed into a synthesis, as in the Hegelian concept.

Yet Tubianskii failed to recognise the other side of the unique, cultural syncretism that Tagore celebrated: the caste system and Sanskritization. Sanskrit was not just another language into which Buddhist philosophical perspectives and folk religions could be translated, and still less was it a common language of the people since teaching it to the lower castes was specifically prohibited. It was the language of Brahmanism, a socio-political and cultural ideology with a variable religious dimension (Bronkhorst, 2013, p. 408). Tubianskii, like Shcherbatskoi, failed to give this due weight. Indeed, when translating Sanskrit concepts, Shcherbatskoi had, in the words of Viktoria Lysenko (2012, pp. 90-91), implicitly assumed the "absolute transparency of the input original language, and the language of the translator, or output language," which was "based on the conception of so called *philosophia perennis*, eternal philosophy," inherited from neo-Kantianism. Shcherbatskoi recognised Mahayana Buddhism involved the Brahmanisation of earlier traditions, but did not fully appreciate the significance of the simultaneous shift to Sanskrit as their language of exposition.

As some significant Indian scholars have since shown, the assimilation of perspectives into Vishnuism took place in certain historical conditions, rooted in socio-economic and political developments: the expansion of the amount of land under cultivation, encroaching on tribal land, brought Brahmins into contact with a wide range of "culturally disparate autochthonous groups" (Nath, 2009, p. 37). The need to mobilise a significant labour force to cultivate the land they had been granted made it impossible for Brahmanical lawgivers, many of whom became large landowners, to treat such peoples simply as pariahs, outcastes or *mlecchas* (outsiders) – as sources of pollution – to be avoided. Belligerence among the indigenous peoples whose land and traditions were being encroached upon needed to be mollified, while they were compelled to abandon traditional forms of agriculture for "intensive field cultivation" based on "plough-based technology" (Nath, 2009, pp. 38-39).

The reorganisation of Brahmanical authority in these circumstances was significant: indigenous peoples had to be Sanskritised, encouraged to adopt practices that enabled them to seek advancement within the caste hierarchy, which developed by linking ascribed economic functions, *jati*, to the *varna* structure derived from the later Vedas. This was necessarily a two-way process according to which Brahmanical doctrine was modified to incorporate indigenous beliefs and deities, but relations of power and authority were far from equal. The mode of incorporation was chiefly the notion of the *avatar*, according to which potentially destabilising figures such as Krishna and Rama were recast as avatars of Vishnu and subordinated to Brahmanism. The growth of what is now recognised as the Hindu pantheon derives from this time and they were developed and disseminated in a specific type of theological text called the *Puranas*, “mosaic-like” texts incorporating diverse tribal folk traditions alongside Vedic elements, modifying them to adjust to contemporary needs. This ultimately evolved into a complex “Purāṇic lore” over a protracted period which was then proclaimed to be ancient and made accessible to the masses through a type of catechism linked to syncretic ritual practices. It was through this process that Brahmins were able “to infuse brāhmaṇical social ethics into these popular cults and re-establish their authority” after the Buddhist challenge to Brahmanism (Jaiswal, 1981, p. 77).

Tagore highlighted the diverse sources of Vishnuism, the fact that as well as the Vedas, it drew upon factors such as Greek and Arab neo-Platonism and, through Persia, Islamic Sufi doctrine. This was a particularly syncretic version of the Brahmo doctrine that the major faiths in India originally formed a unity and that the Brahmanical pursuit of exclusiveness and purity, as well as the idea of the avatar, were a later corruption of the Vedic doctrine. Accomplished Sanskritist and founder (with Tagore’s grandfather Dwarakanath Tagore (1794-1846)) of the reformist Brahmo Samaj, Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), had been prompted by the romantic search for *Ur*-texts among Indo-European philologists to argue that the oldest Vedas retained an original monotheism before subsequently succumbing to idolatry. Figueira (2015, pp. 95, 99) argues that to systematise such a perspective Roy engaged in “canonical gerrymandering and free translation techniques” to such an extent that he “editorialized scripture to promote his reform agenda.” Roy’s interpretation and his reform agenda were later to find support in the work of perhaps the most popular Indologist of the period, Friedrich Max Müller

(1823-1900), who urged the Brahma Samaj to pursue Roy's "reformation" and so draw closer to Christianity.

In his 1918 work on nationalism, which Tubianskii translated, Tagore presented India as an open and principally syncretic cultural formation that incorporated all races, faiths and jatis, as opposed to the exclusive and closed forms of nation emerging in Europe.⁶ Vishnuism was thus a manifestation of the unique spirit of toleration in India from which the world could learn:

India [...] has tried to make an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek for some basis of unity. This basis has come through our saints, like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitnaya and others, preaching one God to all races of India.

In finding the solution of our problem we shall have helped to solve the world problem as well. What India has been, the whole world is now. The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you must also find a basis of unity which is not political. If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity. There is only one history – the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one. (Tagore, 1918, p. 99)

These musings about the unique contribution Indian culture could make to the spiritual becoming of humanity was not difficult to interpret in neo-Kantian terms, which is precisely what Tubianskii did. In this he followed in the tracks of Cohen's Marburg colleague, Paul Natorp, who had met Tagore in 1921 and called him "the educator we need at this moment [...] a warning voice who [...] wishes on his part to help us to realize our grave mistakes and to overcome them" (quoted in Kampchen, 1990, p. 118). Tagore, meanwhile, had invited Shcherbatskoi to teach at his Visva-Bharati university at Santiniketan which was the institutional expression of his educational philosophy (Vigasin, 2008, p. 346).⁷

⁶ Tubianskii translated and published this text in Russian in 1922, having already published an abridged version in 1919. It should be noted Tagore was here contrasting the Indian experience with the failure of the West to deal with the legacy of slavery.

⁷ Shcherbatskoi was unable to take up Tagore's invitation. On Tagore's often penetrating views on anticolonial pedagogy see Bannerji (2020).

Greater India

By taking a colonial cultural narrative about the difference of the Orient and transforming it into an active vision of the contribution India could make to the world, Tagore inspired and became a figurehead of a movement to promote the idea of a cultural unity of “Greater India.” This was promoted by elite anticolonial Indians and the French Indologist Sylvain Lévi (1863-1935).⁸ This attempt to evoke a “Golden Age of Indian cultural flowering during which Indian religious ideas, morals, literary epics and art had been scattered in all directions of the wind” culminated, in 1926, in the formation of the Greater India Society by group of mainly Bengali intellectuals with Tagore as honorary advisor (Spoelder, 2024, p. 3). The society published the *Journal of the Greater India Society* from 1934 until 1959, in which contributors argued a benign Indian civilizing mission had taken place in the region from Central Asia to Indo-China and beyond, with ancient missionaries of Buddhism and Brahmanism playing a central role. As Spoelder (2024, p. 4) notes, the “political and culturalist discourse” of Greater India as a “national and civilizational entity” was “at the heart of anti-imperialist and internationalist schemes” but was “multilayered and full of contradictions” in part becoming “a colonial fantasy and (Hindu) chauvinist projection.” If we study the subsequent history of these ideas without losing sight of the historical context then they appear rather problematic. Tagore’s vision of India’s “superior and exceptional civilizational force with a mission to fulfil abroad,” has, Spoelder concludes, “long shed its interwar humanist glow and buttresses the historical fantasies and global ambitions of Hindu nationalists” (Spoelder, 2024, p. 285). There is little doubt that figures within the society “instrumentalised” Tagore and his Visva-Bharati project (Zabarskaitė, 2023, p. 143), but this was not an isolated incident. The danger was already evident when his idealist and culturalist focus prevented Tagore from understanding Mussolini’s fascism and was seen as endorsing the latter’s vision of a “Greater Italy” in the 1920s.⁹

Both neo-Kantianism and Tagore’s projects had considerable value in illuminating and partially overcoming the limitations of “philologism,” and in partially challenging what are now generally referred to as Orientalist perspectives. Yet their

⁸ Lévi was not only a guest lecturer at Visva-Bharati but also a close friend of Sergei Ol’denburg and Shcherbatskoi, as well as a corresponding member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

⁹ For a detailed account see Kundu (2015).

abstraction from the socially embedded nature of the production and reception of texts and wider intellectual formulations, along with a blindness to the institutional realities of academic teaching and research, which resulted from a commitment to philosophical idealism, obscured crucial issues. Thus, the Marburg neo-Kantians sought to delineate the object domains of academic disciplines with reference to pure “logics” based on mathematics, neglecting the social and ideological factors that shape them. One of Shcherbatskoi’s most talented younger colleagues, Evgenii Obermiller (1901-1935), became an honorary member of the Greater India Society and contributed to its journal,¹⁰ presenting the Leningrad School’s study of Buddhism through Tibetan and Mongolian translations of Sanskrit texts and the commentaries of regional scholiasts as a variety of “Greater India” scholarship. Like other advocates of “Greater India” of the time, however, the school retained Brahmanical assumptions about the supremacy of cultures in Sanskrit, and so when Tubianskii celebrated Tagore’s philosophy for continuing the Vishnuite recognition of devotional cults and deities as forms of the orthodox divinity and so creating a “unity of cultural consciousness,” he did not recognise this was a unity of a distinctly oppressive kind.

Here we run up against the limits both of the neo-Kantian critique of philologism and of the forms pre-Revolutionary oriental studies: analysis of the concrete conditions of the production of a historical source (the “what is?,” the “fact” of the source) serves only as a prelude to abstraction based on the ethical principles (“what ought to be,” its “value”) that have been established on the basis of that source. Contestation over the value of a source, its concrete social meaning among differently positioned agents in subsequent ages and social relations, its role as a reference point within the conflicts of different moments of history are obscured by such formulations as the Marburg neo-Kantians’ “consciousness in general.”

Such a position underlay much pre-Revolutionary Oriental studies, so in 1911 the great historian of Central Asia, Vasilii Bartol’d (1977, p. 208), argued for a general and invariant “evolution” leading to the “gradual convergence of an ever-greater number of

¹⁰ In a letter from founding member, Honorary Secretary, and editor of the *Journal of the Greater India Society* Upendra Nath Ghoshal (1886-1969) on 6 June 1935, Obermiller’s formal election as an honorary member of the Society is acknowledged and he is thanked for his “warm and sustained interest in our Society” (AV 100/1/74/1-8). Obermiller may well have been influenced by Lévi, who was the supervisor of the society’s founder Kalidas Nag (1892-1966) and contributed to its publications.

separate societies” in a universal culture. Bartol'd concluded that if imperial expansion facilitated cultural exchange and mutual influence, as he believed was the case in Russia, then it should be embraced.

Post-Revolutionary Philology and the Orient

Central aims of the Revolution conflicted with these perspectives and operated within the academic sphere alongside significant paradigm shifts in the human and social sciences. The anti-colonial and anti-imperial principles of the new revolutionary state, which championed the rights of nations to self-determination up to secession, egalitarian economic policies replete with widespread positive discrimination programmes, and a commitment to the equality of all languages and cultures within what became the USSR consolidated a dramatic shift in funding and organisation of research. This spurred on the shift to new paradigms within both philology and philosophy: structural and sociological approaches came to dominate philology, while in philosophy idealism and “ethicism” gave way to materialist and political approaches. Generational shifts within institutions were more pronounced and abrupt than is common, while established scholars sought, with various degrees of success, to adapt their approaches to those which yielded institutional support in new conditions. The work of younger Marxist scholars often failed to achieve the level of sophistication and nuance of earlier academic specialists, but they led a bold reorientation of perspectives and an opening of new avenues of research that were unparalleled in Western scholarship for decades to come.

Advocates of “Greater India” scholarship had retained Brahmanical assumptions about the supremacy of cultures in Sanskrit, neglecting such factors as the migration and influence of the Roma and lower-caste Indians engaged in contemporary forms of indentured labour. This changed abruptly in the work of the most prominent representative of the new trend in Indian philology, Aleksei Barannikov (1890-1952). After a conventional training as a Sanskritist in Kiev, Barannikov worked at Saratov University where he published some of the earliest research on changes in the Russian language as a result of the War and Revolution (1919). This led him to study current theoretical perspectives on language and society before applying the same methodology to the study on Indian languages. From the middle of the 1920s he became the USSR’s

foremost scholar on the language and culture of Soviet Roma, discussing the modalities of linguistic assimilation and resistance to the language of Russian and Ukrainian “host” communities, as well as the ways in which Romani had influenced aspects of Russian argot (1931a; 1931b; 1934). He then produced some pathbreaking sociolinguistic work on language and caste in the formation of Indian vernacular languages and literatures, detailing the centrifugal and centripetal forces at work. Sanskrit was now specifically viewed as the bearer of orthodox Brahmanical perspectives striving to overcome or at least contain the heterodox and even dissident perspectives of those who wrote in the vernacular was detailed in literary analysis. The figures most prominently associated with dissenting forms of vernacular literature were the Hindi poet Kabir (1414-1580) and the Marathi poet Tukaram (1608-1650).

In significant studies on the rise of literature in Hindi in the mid-1930s, Barannikov (1936; 1937) discussed the ways in which the potentially disruptive deity Krishna, originating in regional folklore, was Brahmanised in the *Puranas* but then deeper levels of meaning contradicting Brahmanism were reactivated in vernacular retellings. With the emergence of the first work in modern Hindi prose, Lallu Lal’s *Prem Sagar* [The Ocean of Love] 1867, Barannikov revealed the coexistence within a single text of sharply opposed orientations, breaking apart the apparent unity of Vaishnavism at the very moment Hindi emerges as a common language of all castes, with Sanskrit increasingly confined to ritual functions. British colonialism had, he argued, led the Indian intellectuals to develop a common language, but limited its operation as a result of the penetration of English into commercial and administrative spheres. In a subsequent series of works published in the 1940s, Barannikov (1948) outlined an earlier stage in the development of such literature to sixteenth-century vernacular verse retelling of the *Ramayana*, the *Ramcharitmanas* [Lake of the deeds of Rama]. He presents as an early attempt by Tulsi Das, an orthodox Brahmin writer, to transcend the limitations of caste by writing “for the people, not just for Brahmins.” Though seeking to combat heretical beliefs from within Vishnuite sects and to reinforce orthodoxy, Barannikov viewed Tulsi Das’s text to be a masterpiece of Indian realism, presenting a social panorama of perspectives albeit ultimately subordinated to Brahmanism. This, Barannikov saw as transcending the limitations of Kabir and Tukaram because Tulsi Das oriented on the social whole rather than narrow, caste interests, and was motivated by the patriotic aim to show the people

“how to save the country and its culture at a time of terrible struggle with [Moghul] conquerors” (Barannikov, 1948, pp. 13-14).

The works discussed here relate to two distinct periods in Soviet oriental studies in general and Indology in particular, framed by, but not entirely synchronous with, the vagaries of Soviet foreign policy.¹¹ In the earlier period there is a focus on the convergence of interests between the indigenous colonial elite and colonial powers, with an attempt to highlight the neglected and irreducible aspects of the struggles and culture of the colonised masses. The definitive and perhaps final statement of this might be seen in Barannikov’s programmatic article about Indology of 1941 in which the convergence of colonial and Brahmanical distortions of Indology is laid out in significant detail (Barannikov, 1941, 2024). In the latter period, this focus is subordinated to the overall cause of the Brahmin-led national liberation movement, showing the emergence of a national movement, led by progressive elements of the indigenous elite, that incorporated popular perspectives into its cause. When this phase reaches its conclusion, in the 1950s, there is a return to viewing the Sanskritic “great tradition” as the foundational structure of Indian culture. Barannikov died in 1952 before this transition was complete and his work was subsequently relegated in importance in the USSR in favour of more traditional forms of Sanskrit-centred Indology promoting the idea of the unity of Indian civilization.

It is, however, illuminating to view the earlier period in the light of recent studies about anti-Brahmanical movements in India. Perhaps the earliest example of this is the Marathi activist Jottirao Phule (1827-1890), who read the Puranas and Hindu epics in the light of regional folklore to reveal the narratives to be distorted accounts of the subordination of an indigenous people by Brahmins during the putative Aryan invasion discussed above (Phule, 2002 [1873]).¹² Instead of viewing the caste system as the formation of a unitary Indian civilization, as we saw in both colonial Indology and in Tagore’s anti-colonial vision of “greater India,” Phule presented it as a system of slavery facilitated by ideological subordination. In Tamil Nadu, Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) went further to present a similar account based on the reading of Tamil literature and the study of changes in the Tamil language brought about by the Sanskritization that accompanied

¹¹ On this periodisation see Brandist (2022).

¹² On Phule’s life and work see, especially O’Hanlon (1985).

and facilitated Aryan domination.¹³ Ambedkar (1990 [1946]) took up the question again in his 1946 book *Who Were the Shudras?* in which he finally rejected the idea of the Aryan invasion – something that had been regarded as an established fact hitherto – and rejected the idea of an Aryan proto-language that had been brought to India from outside. The fundamental distinction at the basis of the caste system was, for Ambedkar, cultic and not a matter of racial origin, and so the division between the Ārya and Dāsa at the heart of accounts of caste should therefore be viewed as one of class and ideology.

Chaudhuri (2018) argues Ambedkar brought about a “paradigmatic shift of perspective” from established Indology, “reading from the bottom to the top” and fracturing the “purported oneness of India.” In reality, however, he was developing a larger intellectual trend (his 1946 book was actually dedicated to Phule) which established what we might call an *insurgent philology*: “[t]he authoritative narrative of the Sanskritic great tradition which has fixated India into a whole is now burst asunder into multiple narratives, unleashing oppressive relationships” (Chaudhuri, 2018, p. 365). This trend is present both among anti-caste intellectuals in India and in Russia following the Revolution, arising to a considerable extent, but not entirely, separately. Potential links between them include the visits of Marxist, anti-caste intellectuals, campaigners and Buddhologists Dharmanand Kosambi (1876-1947) and Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963) to Leningrad University in the 1920s to 1940s, where they worked with Shcherbatskoi and Barannikov, and the shared influence of the Indian historian, philologist and anti-caste campaigner R.G. Bhandarkar (1837-1925). Study of the intellectual formation of Dalit Buddhism in India needs to take account of these varied tributaries (Ober, 2023). In any case, the crucial point is that the new Indian philology developed in opposition to the Brahmanical-colonial search for *Ur*-texts and proto-languages and instead viewed Indian culture as regionally varied and socially stratified, with layers of meaning that corresponded to historical shifts and ongoing struggles.

¹³ There are still very few of Thass’s works translated from Tamil. For good overviews of his ideas and works see Aloysius (1998) and Ayyathurai (2011).

Semantic Palaeontology

These intellectual movements share an orientation towards establishing a form of semantic palaeontology: the idea that by excavating the layers of meaning of a text one can reveal common substrata that provide evidence of fundamental ideological shifts corresponding to key social changes. One of the key radical aspects of this was the complete erasure of the dichotomy of Indo-Europeanism and Semitics that had dominated philology and Oriental studies for a century, based on stereotypes of the dynamic and mobile nature of the Aryans and the inert and static nature of the Semites. This presumption underlay a dual methodology: the former favoured “textual criticism” and the reconstruction of *Ur*-texts; the latter emphasised “the stratification and disassembling of given texts” and a much greater reliance on epigraphy, the study of inscriptions (Trüper, 2020, pp. 18-19).

This duality had already been questioned by the Russian philologist and historian of literature Aleksandr Veselovskii (1838-1906) and the founder of Russian Indology Ivan Minaev (1840-1890), but the figure who most definitively challenged the bifurcation was the controversial Georgian philologist and archaeologist Nikolai Marr (1865-1934). In his pre-Revolutionary work Marr (1894-1899; 1933-1937 [1899]) challenged the contention that Armenian was simply an Indo-European language and culture by tracing connections between Armenian and Semitic folklore, showing layers of textual meanings that resulted from events such as the Crusades. His excavations of the ancient Armenian city Ani led Marr (1934) to focus on multi-lingual epigraphs carved into the architecture of ruined public buildings, and from this he began to hypothesise that Armenian language and culture was formed by the forcible imposition of a noble (*kniazheskii*) Aryan culture on an earlier Caucasian culture (*Japhetic*) that was related to Semitic by virtue of having a common ancestor (*Noetic*). This was the beginning of his extravagant theorising that not only Armenian, but all European culture was the result of the same process that created India in the “Aryan Invasion” account of its formation. Modern European languages and cultures thus had a caste character, which he subsequently revised after the Revolution in accordance with Marxist terminology to highlight its class character (*Klassovost*). Ultimately Marr abandoned the ethnic centrality of his argument, pronounced “Indo-Europeanism” to be academic cover for colonial domination, and

argued the dichotomy between East and West had been replaced with social layers, with the result that different languages and cultures represented specific stages and conjunctures in a “single glottogonic process” that was a dimension of social development. Thus, a common heritage of semantic material underlay all languages and cultures, each of which had different origins but were converging in a unitary process of “crossing” (*skreshenie*) and merger driven by socioeconomic processes that redefined cognitive processes at each stage of development. No matter how different languages and cultures might appear, palaeontological analysis could reveal pervasive typological parallels.

While much of this theorising was highly speculative, and the coherence of the linguistic evidence he adduced was subjected to penetrating criticism, Marr established an institutional and ideological framework within which, for a time, semantic palaeontology could flourish. Steering clear of some of Marr’s more dubious theorising, the Biblical scholar Izrail’ Frank-Kamenetskii (1880-1937) drew typological parallels between plots and metaphors in canonical Sanskrit and Judaic texts, arguing they revealed shared cognitive structures that correlated with the stadial development of modes of production, labour and social organisation (Frank-Kamenetskii, 1935; 1938). Combining methods developed in Semitic philology, especially the work of the founder of German critical Biblical Studies Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) with Marburg neo-Kantianism and Marr’s semantic palaeontology, Frank-Kamenetskii combined detailed philological analysis of stratified historical documents with philosophical analysis of worldviews reminiscent of Cohen and especially Cassirer.¹⁴ While tracing the emergence of conceptual thinking from the “diffuse” semantics of myth and through folklore, he explicitly refrained from the speculative idealism of the Marburg School and drew conclusions only from linguistic data subjected to paleontological analysis. In a programmatic, collective volume dedicated to tracing the origins of the French Mediaeval romance *Tristan and Isolda* (Marr ed., 1932), a monument of European literature was shown to be based on an anonymous and sedimented body of semantic material common to the peoples of “Afro-Eurasia.”

¹⁴ Cohen and Wellhausen were actually well acquainted, both working at Marburg University. On Cohen’s attitude towards Wellhausen’s work see Cohen (1918).

The Bakhtin Connection

Apart from the intrinsic interest and importance of the work discussed in the preceding sections, for the purposes of the current journal the intersection with the work of Bakhtin should be noted. Bakhtin's early commitment to neo-Kantian idealism has been the subject of many discussions, and his attempts to overcome the abstract nature of that philosophy through phenomenological and emerging literary studies are fairly well known. Yet a new dimension comes into focus when we consider the connection with Oriental studies. By the time Bakhtin wrote his main essays on the novel in the 1930s, Barannikov's modern Indian philology had come to prominence, and we find many common positions regarding the ways in which early modern vernacular literature relates to popular oral cultures and folklore on the one hand, and the official doctrines and genres on the other. Where, in the 1934-1936 essay *Slovo v romane* [Discourse in the Novel] Bakhtin connects the rise of the European novel to the emergence of the national language, which creates a common sphere of verbal exchange, heteroglossia (*raznorechie*), Barannikov traces the same phenomenon in the vernacular retellings of the Sanskrit epics. Now the writer allows a range of socially positioned agents to speak, even if approaching that variety "from above," establishing a hierarchy of perspectives, subordinating heterodox to authoritative perspectives (as in the *Ramcharitmanas*) or what Bakhtin (2012, pp. 155ff.) calls the "first stylistic line" of the European novel. The presence of Sanskritisms within the narrative verse of Tulsi Das suggests that heteroglossia (*raznorechie*) is still emerging, struggling to be born from the polyglossia (*raznoiazychie*) of the pre-modern period. This is rather more developed in *Prem Sagar*, where the vernacular is much more coherent, where prose and verse alternates, and the struggle over the image of Krishna strains the unity of the work and produces a hybrid genre. The prose narrative was a late arrival that came with colonialism, and the Hindi vernacular achieved unity only in conditions where the language of the coloniser constrained its use. Bakhtin's explanation of the rise of the European novel focuses on some of the same processes, but have their own strengths: Bakhtin's work has a greater philosophical sophistication, while Barannikov offers a much stronger connection with the institutional framework within which literature emerges, functions and is received.

Bakhtin and Barannikov also focus on the ways in which authors actively engage with the anonymous body of folk culture and narratives that precede the rise of literature as such. In this they drew upon but adopted a different focus from the semantic palaeontology developed by Frank-Kamenetskii and others such as the classicist Ol'ga Freidenberg, who had focused on the pre-history of ancient Greek literature. Folklore, for Bakhtin and Barannikov, are rather closer to the ideas on the question that were to be developed by Gramsci in his *Quaderni del carcere* [Prison Notebooks], as an “implicit,” “stratified,” “many sided” if unsystematised, conception of the world held by determinate strata of society, and that is in *opposition* to “official” conceptions (Gramsci, 1975, pp. 2311-2312).

In Bakhtin’s revised 1963 study of Dostoevsky and his 1965 book on Rabelais, the layers of folk culture become a resource on which authors draw, in given historical conditions, in order to escape the limitations of the current social hierarchy and to engage critically with the ideologies it generates. One does not need to dig far into the “semantic depths” for it to become apparent that the distinction between European and Oriental substrata disappear, and so Bakhtin views the late Vedic *Purusha sukta* as the “oldest monument” of the “widespread mythical concept of the origin of various social groups from various parts of a god’s body,” and this constitutes the foundation on which Rabelais borrowed from popular tales of “Indian wonders” (*indiiskie chudesa*) to create his grotesque imagery of the body (Bakhtin, 2008, p. 357; 2010, p. 377).¹⁵

Conclusion

The intellectual trends discussed above, centred on, but not limited to, the USSR and India, constitute a field that can justifiably be termed “insurgent philology.” These thinkers each in their own way, and to varying degrees, challenged the modes of conceptualisation and generalisation that governed Indo-European philology, revealing them to be entangled with the project of colonial domination *per se* and Brahmanical domination within the framework of colonialism, but in doing so they refused to reify

¹⁵ Bakhtin (2010, pp. 369-373) here drew heavily here on Georges Lote’s 1938 monograph *La vie et l’oeuvre de François Rabelais* (Life and Work of François Rabelais), the extent of which can be seen in Bakhtin (2010, pp. 860-866.) (In: BAKHTIN, Michail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 351).

discourses as structures operating independently of the work of historically situated agents. They basically retained the philological focus on “evidence, correspondence, and evaluation, situating authors in their motives and times.” They also resisted the temptation to withdraw into “philologism,” remaining acutely aware of the historical resonance of the works under discussion and viewing them as resources for further interventions in the wider social dialogues of their times.

The Russian Revolution provided the historical preconditions for this trend to be brought to fruition for a number of reasons: the Eurasian nature of the Russian Empire and USSR, the anticolonial and internationalist orientation of early Soviet policy within the Communist International in particular; the reorientation of academic and cultural institutions; the redefinition of West and East as developmental and political rather than civilizational categories; and last but by no means least, the factors common to philology and to Marxism as such. Following Gramsci, cited above, Brennan (2014, p. 10) notes that “[b]oth Marxism and philology adhere to historical forms of knowing, to the sedimentary traces of a past that happened, to the ultimate creativity of the unnamed, unheralded, popular elements of society.” While the major Soviet scholars Marr, Frank-Kamenetskii and Bakhtin were not Marxists, these commonalities enabled and encouraged them, in early Soviet conditions, to accentuate and pursue precisely these areas, leading to advances in the field. Barannikov, who had stronger Marxist connections, was able to connect these factors with the institutional and sociopolitical history of Indian language and literature, but was also more directly exposed to the vagaries of the official Soviet ideology.

The Indian thinkers we have discussed were also not Marxists. Phule and Thass wrote prior to the Marxism becoming a significant intellectual trend in India, while Ambedkar had a complex relationship with Marxism and a troubled relationship with the Indian Communist Party (Teltumbde, 2018a, pp. 91-116). Nevertheless, the anti-caste politics of the thinkers inevitably cut cross all attempts to present India, and even Hindu society as a unity, making them extremely suspicious of Brahmin-dominated nationalism. Regarding caste as a particularly Indian articulation of class and their commitment to a philologically rigorous ideology critique of Brahmanical narratives, through the selective appropriation and critical application of Indological research inevitably brought them close to Marxism. This convergence becomes especially interesting when we consider

Kosambi and Sankrityayan's visits to Leningrad and their attempt to combine Dalit Buddhism with Marxism. In Ambedkar's case, the critique of Brahmanism and its convergence with the interests of colonialism reached a much fuller development than in Phule and Thass, and while he was to choose Buddhism as the basis for his ideology of liberation, as Teltumbde (2018b, p. 226) notes, he took Marxism as a "benchmark, a measuring scale to validate his decisions."

Stalin's denunciation of Marr in June 1950, in the midst of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign catalysed a shift towards a much more abstract and inflexible official Marxism, based on preconceived schemata, which negated its philological orientation. As part of the Soviet drive to form alliances with "progressive nationalisms" among the decolonising nations, the notion a unitary Western discourse about the Orient ("bourgeois orientalism"), which was counterposed with an equally unitary "Soviet orientalism," was officially promoted. Via a series of revisions, shifts and transfers to new intellectual contexts, the former was ultimately to find its full expression in the idea of a unified discourse of orientalism, and the latter was to become the postcolonial critique. Although the author of *Orientalism*, Edward Said, sought to resist attempts to turn Orientalism into an anonymous discourse, and to insist on the importance of philological investigations, drawing on a range of Marxist humanists such as Gramsci, Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams, the structuralist appropriation of the idea swept the human sciences in the West. This has overshadowed an important trend of thought, some of which we have discussed above, and which needs to be brought into the spotlight of critical scholarship once again.

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Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso* [*Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Analysis*] to Open Science, this journal Only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review I

An innovative and interesting article from the field of (critical) historiography of linguistics with flawless argumentation and a solid theoretical foundation. Only some minor formal corrections were made.

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Review II

The work is fully in line with the stated topic. The author's vision is to explore early twentieth-century Russian and Soviet Indology, to show that Russian thinkers developed a perspective that valued the scholarship and perspectives of indigenous researchers and used this to challenge the dominant trends within European Indology. The article is divided into six paragraphs, each of which analyzes one of the aspects of the stated problem. In the conclusion, the author draws reasonable conclusions and outlines the prospects for further research of the problem.

The author analyzes the intellectual trends of the 1920s-1930s centered in the USSR and India, defining them as "insurgent philology." According to the author, "these thinkers each in their own way, and to varying degrees, challenged the modes of conceptualisation and generalisation that governed Indo-European philology, revealing them to be entangled with the project of colonial domination per se and Brahmanical domination within the framework of colonialism, but in doing so they refused to reify discourses as structures operating independently of the work of historically situated agents."

The author of the article relies on the latest research on the problem. Unfortunately, he does not address the works of C. Brandist, which are close to the problem at hand in theme, period and material. K. Brandist first analyzed and introduced into scientific circulation the materials of the archive of the Institute of Comparative History of Literature and Languages of the West and the East. For instance – Brandist C. The Bakhtin Circle and Research on Language and Literature in Leningrad Institutions: the view from the archives. Proceedings of the XII International Bakhtin Conference, Jyvaskyla, 2006. pp. 144–156. Available at: <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/2134/>.

Brandist C. Bakhtin's Historical Turn and Its Soviet Antecedents // *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso*. Vol. 11, No. 1 São Paulo Jan./Apr. 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2176-457324626>.

In his article "The Bakhtin Circle and the East (or What Bakhtinian Ideas Tell Us about 'Decolonising the Curriculum')" links with the early anti-caste movement and contemporary Soviet Indology are drawn and are contrasted with perspectives current in so-called "subaltern studies" (Brandist, C. "The Bakhtin Circle and the East (or What Bakhtinian Ideas Tell Us about 'Decolonising the Curriculum')". *Literaturovedcheskii zhurnal*, no. 4(54), 2021, pp. 212–229. DOI: [10.31249/litzhur/2021.54.13](https://doi.org/10.31249/litzhur/2021.54.13))

The author considers the development of "insurgent philology" in early Soviet Russia in its connection with Orientalism.

The works of Soviet and Russian thinkers (A.P. Barannikov, M.I. Tubiansky, F.I. Shcherbatsky) are analyzed as a contribution to the development of the "insurgent" trend that challenged the dominant trends in European Indology.

Of particular value are the author's reflections on the possibility of a new look at Bakhtin's ideas of the 1930s concerning the formation of the novel genre and the peculiarities of the novel word. The author outlines the prospects for a comparative study of Bakhtin's and Barannikov's views on the significance of the anonymous body of folk culture and narratives in the formation of literature as such.

Language and style meet the requirements for scientific articles.

I would like to draw the author's attention to the necessity of observing the rules when making references to the works of scientists and sources of quotations. In the paragraph "The Bakhtin connection" the works of M. Bakhtin are mentioned, his monograph on Rabelais is quoted, but the source of quotation is not indicated. M. Bakhtin's works should be included in the bibliography.

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