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A Graduate Book Report on *The Nay Science – A History of German Indology*

“If the humanities failed to humanize us, [it is] because we deprived them of their humanity by alternately aestheticizing them and handing them over to scholarship.”

D. S. Carne-Ross¹

In the *Nay Science – A History of German Indology*, Vishwa Adluri and Joy Bagchee make three crucial claims: that the historical-critical method used by German Indologists to study the Indian Epic *Mahābhārata* evolved out of the Neo-Protestantism of the eighteenth century; that this unacknowledged origin of the historical-critical method led German Indologists to pseudo-critical interpretations such as the presence of an Indo-Germanic race in the Indian Epic; and that scholars should not use supposedly scientific methods to discern the truth of texts in the humanities. By exploring (1) how an early German Indologist, Adolf Holtzmann, projected Neo-Protestantism onto German Indological research, (2) how the conclusions from this method express unacknowledged theological biases and prejudices, and (3) how the authors think that a practitioner-scholar, Gandhi, better engages with an interpretation of the Indian Epic, I show how the authors make out their argument. Although I agree with the authors’ indictment of the methods of German Indology, I think that by employing a practitioner-scholar to counteract German Indological scholars’ mode of scholarship, the authors made Gandhi an easy target of modern scholarly biases against practitioner-scholars.

¹ Carne-Ross, *Scenario for a New Year*, 202

Before I start exploring the three issues mentioned above, I want to provide a quick summary of the main points made by the author *within* the context of these three crucial points. This summary will make the more comprehensive and later exploration of these three points more understandable. This quick summary will take broad, broader, and broadest frames that explain how the authors have structured their work. Following that, a more formal and detailed summary of the structure and chapters of the book will follow.

Broadly, then, the authors claim that German Indologists uncritically accepted that theories and methods used in Neo-Protestantism Biblical criticism could apply to the study of the *Mahābhārata* and its most famous chapter, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. They explain that because Protestant resistance to traditional authority proved vital to establish textual criticism on the grounds of reason, German Indologists resisted the Indian commentarial tradition by employing a historical-critical method while remaining unaware of its theological origins. Thus, German Indologists applied the historical-critical method to uncover uncorrupted versions of texts, for instance, because they thought the Indian commentarial tradition had corrupted such texts with ideas of religion.

More broadly, the authors want to show that this interpretation of the Indian Epic happened because German Indology evolved when German scholars questioned the historical origins of Germany. German Indologists then mused over ideas and searched for a mythical Indo-Germanic race inside the text of the Indian Epic. This stance entailed vilifying not only the Indian commentarial tradition for a reason mentioned above of corrupting the Epic but also Jews who did not belong to this mythical Indo-Germanic race. German Indology then masked as an intellectual defense of anti-Semitism.

Most broadly, given that German Indologists uncritically accepted the scientific nature of their discipline and method while remaining unaware of its theological origins, this stance led to pseudo-interpretations of the Indian Epic. The authors then wonder whether scholars should employ supposedly scientific methods to discern the truth of texts in the humanities. Specifically, just as the German Indologists did not acknowledge the theological origins of their historical-critical method, methods used in the social and natural sciences may have unacknowledged origins that make them problematic as methods to find the truth of texts in the humanities. German Indologists, however, had no ethical concern with employing such methods in the study of the Indian Epic. The authors charge that the truth of the humanities does not represent a solid and quantifiable piece of empirical data like the ones that natural and social scientists dissect.

The above then represents a summary of the main points the authors argue within the context of the crucial claims mentioned in the introduction of this paper. I now turn to how the authors encapsulate such crucial claims in the book's overall structure with this broad structure in mind. They have structured it around five chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction, the authors explain the crucial point, among the three made above, that bothers them the most: the idea that a scientific method can produce truth out a text in the humanities. In the conclusion, they charge that this represents a highly problematic because these texts do not represent monolithic pieces of data but part of a living tradition. They then bring in Gandhi to represent a proper mode of doing scholarship on the Indian Epic. They enclose this method-over-truth meta-argument around a series of chapters that unfold more or less chronologically.

More precisely, in chapter 1, the authors describe how German Indologists used tools of Biblical criticism to deconstruct the *Mahābhārata* and its most famous chapter, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and project therein their ideas of an Indo-Germanic race. Just as Biblical scholars employed tools of Biblical criticism to deconstruct the Bible and dismiss the Church's commentarial tradition, German Indologists employed such tools to search for an original version of the *Mahābhārata* while dismissing the Indian commentarial tradition. They, furthermore, define German Indology not as a discipline practiced by German scholars but as a mode of scholarship based on the employment of the historical-critical method while remaining unaware of its theological origins.

In chapter 2, the authors identify what they see as critical features of the mythical Indo-Germanic race and what that meant for the history of the German people. German Indologists depict their ancestors as warlike Aryans capable of engendering great violence while standing in for greatness. They further argue that this Indo-Germanic race lay at the root of the Indian, Greek, and German epic traditions from which the German peoples descended.

In chapters 3 and 4, the authors concern the different versions of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* the Indologists identified in their attempted reconstruction of an original text. Among many, a *Trinitarian Gītā* by Rudolph Otto even claimed that

Here is the same God [Krishna], before whose inscrutability all creatures become silent and dumb and nonetheless in the experience of His Overforce... simultaneously find inner śānti, the [inner] peace. We find him again in the words of Paul: "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" [Romans 9:20; King James Version]. These parallels warn us against a derivation of religious intuitions from sectarian origins. They warn

us even more against a derivation from “Blood and Soil...” For Job is an Edomite, that means, a Semite, and Paul is a Jew. They also warn us against seeing the unique aspect of Aryan-Indian religion, in contrast to the “absolute feeling of dependency” of perverse Jewish souls, as [being] the feeling of equality and kinship with “the ultimate reality.”²

To conclude that Krishna represents the same God as the one in the Trinity and that the Indo-Germanic race contrasts with the perversity of Jewish souls, the authors charge Otto had to excise several verses of the *Gītā* that contradicted his interpretation. Because the verses did not represent more than pieces of data, he had no problems excising them to prove his point. The authors then categorize what they see as critical features of German Indology: a rejection of Indian theology and philosophy and overzealous confidence in the Indologists’ ability to recover the original of Indian Epic.

Finally, in chapter 5, the authors delineate further issues with the German Indologists’ uncritical acceptance of the historical-critical method. They contend that German Indology has become a progressively outmoded and isolated discipline. The very self-understanding of the discipline refuses to engage with significant developments in contemporary philosophy. They conclude with a broader discussion of method over truth following exploration of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to the study of the humanities.

With this firm grasp on the three crucial points the authors make, the central claims they make within the context of these three claims, and how they have structured their work to map out their argument, I now turn to an analysis surrounding the three crucial claims. As a reminder, the three crucial claims argue that the historical-critical method used by German

² Otto, *Die Urgestalt der Bhagavad-Gītā*, 27-28

Indologists evolved out of Neo-Protestantism, that the method resulted in pseudo-critical interpretations of the Indian Epic, and that a scientific method cannot discern truth in the humanities. Because of the critical nature of Neo-Protestantism as the background for German Indology's historical-critical method, a definition becomes due. However, because Neo-Protestantism falls outside of my area of scholarship, a full quote follows here:

The historical-critical method had been developed... and applied... to the study of the Old Testament and... to the study of the New Testament. It progressively replaced the Protestant hermeneutic principle of *scriptura sacra est verbum dei* (The Holy Bible is the Word of God) with the principle of *scriptura sacra continent verbum dei* (The Holy Bible contains the Word of God). Coupled with this new interpretive tendency, there was a new urgency regarding the need to look past the literal sense of the text (the so-called *sensus literalis*, which earlier Protestant theologians had held to be the true sense of scripture) at the historical realities (the *realia*) behind the text... Only the historical-critical method was capable of retrieving the meaning of the text via a critical, scientific inquiry.³

The one German scholar Adluri and Bagchee singularly focus on and who made possible for this type of criticism projection onto the rising discipline of Indology represents Adolf Holtzmann. The authors charge him as the source of the scholarly suppositions that later generations of German Indologists uncritically followed. Specifically, Holtzmann rejected a philological-only reading of the *Mahābhārata* and projected his scholarship on the Indian Epic over the history of the German people.⁴ According to the authors, 'a desire to "recover an ancient, glorious Indo-Germanic past for Germany"⁵ motivated Holtzmann. His

³ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 17

⁴ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 74

⁵ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 74

interpretation meant to prove how “the *Mahābhārata* [could have evolved from an Indo-Germanic warrior epic] into the work of [the corrupted Indian commentarial tradition] we have today.”⁶ For the authors, Holtzmann placed on the *Mahābhārata* an assumed “conflict between... rational, secular, and progressive... [versus] dogmatic, superstitious, and conservative [traditions],” which did not initially dwell in the Epic. Of course, German Indology embodied the former, while the Indian commentarial tradition represented the latter.

Thus, German Indologists remained unaware that they disguised Protestant theological assumptions as critical scholarship on the *Mahābhārata* and *Bhagavad-Gītā*.⁷ Because their historical-critical method reacted to forces of theological traditions, “the modern historical critic rather than the tradition was now established as the sole authority on the text.”⁸ In other words, German Indology now positioned itself as a necessary tool for critically interpreting the Indian Epic to the German people. A bureaucratized Indology thus ensued as a wall between the text and the reader, requiring “the creation of a specialized corps of interpreters capable of *translating* it back into the present.”⁹ The authors argue that “granting [German Indologists] absolute freedom to determine what is... salvifically relevant in the [*Gītā*]”¹⁰ essentially exposes the theological sources of their supposedly scientific scholarship as the Indologists became the authority to claim what the text means and how it should be received.

⁶ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 74

⁷ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 7

⁸ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 16

⁹ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 16

¹⁰ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 16

With brief references to Michel Foucault, the authors theorize how this power dynamics played out between German Indologists and the Indian commentarial tradition. Foucault indicates “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific aspects of power attached to the true.”¹¹ Specifically, German Indologists attached scientificity to their discipline. They regarded the historical-critical method as able to bring out truths Indian scholars, who had been studying those same texts for millennia before German scholars, had remained unable to do. However, the authors charge that “[such assumptions] were never actually shown to be true of the Indian texts,”¹² however. Remarkably, even today, there has not been discovered an Aryan Indo-Germanic race, even in the interpretation of critical editions of the *Mahābhārata*.

Because the employment of the historical-critical methods led to pseudo interpretations on the Indian Epic, the authors argue that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics should replace the historical-critical method and counteract the abuses of German Indology. They argue that Gadamer, responding to the Enlightenment bias against theological traditions, “grants as scientific about the human sciences... [a] liberation of the mind from dogma”¹³ but questions “the cognitive value of undoing tradition.”¹⁴ In his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer shows how the abandonment of traditionally theological traditions incites issues of scholarly ethics because the “overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, [is] itself proved to be a prejudice.”¹⁵ The authors’ display of the abuses

¹¹ Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault*, 132, vol. 3

¹² Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 300

¹³ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 419

¹⁴ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 419

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 277

of German Indology to the study of the Indian Epic means that to be the case precisely when German Indologists applied such prejudice to resist the Indian commentarial tradition.

Applying Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to German Indology, the authors finally claim that Indologists embody an overzealous reliance on the ability of the historical-critical method to produce truth in the humanities. A traditional hermeneutics on these texts, in their words, can initially function as a "philosophical and critical reflection on the Enlightenment and its methodological shortcomings."¹⁶ Wondering whether "is it therefore not worthwhile... to look at the Indian tradition when interpreting Indian texts rather than launch a campaign of general vilification,"¹⁷ the authors indicate that the *Gītā* could have entered into dialogue with German Indology through "philosophical perspectives from Plato to Kant and Hegel and from Nietzsche to Heidegger."¹⁸ However, German Indologists failed to keep up with such philosophies while attempting to protect the supposed scientificity of their discipline and method.

Following this analysis of the book's main arguments, I have come to think the authors have contributed significantly to the study of religion by showcasing how modern scholarship may skirt inquiries into its provenance. Adluri and Bagchee have led us to consider a wide range of issues within the theories and methods employed in the humanities: in what sense can text-historical research represent a science when none of the criteria for truth in the natural sciences holds for the text-historical scholarship?¹⁹ Should a supposedly scientific method rein over a rigorous philosophical hermeneutics to forge truth in the humanities even as such methods mean to "exercise over the nature of things the authority which properly

¹⁶ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 420

¹⁷ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 423

¹⁸ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 432

¹⁹ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 413

belongs to the mind?”²⁰ Specifically, the authors argue that German Indologists’ application of the historical-critical method has erred because it regards truth in the humanities as a piece of dead data while ignoring the text as part of a living tradition. In my opinion, the authors have made a compelling case for that.

However, the question remains of what the authors suggest as a counteracting mode of scholarship to the German Indologists’ historical-critical method. They show that Gandhi interpreted the *Gītā* as part of a living tradition because “the task of interpretation is not one of mere academic cleverness, but the responsibility of a life lived.”²¹ In their words, Gandhi’s interpretation “created a liberation theology and used the text for humanistic aims.”²² At the same time, German Indologists “claimed that their views [were] not interpretations but *facts* and they did so under the cover of scientism.”²³ Specifically, the authors claim that

Gandhi does not naïvely think that it is possible to arrive at an original meaning of the text without any prejudice. Rather, Gandhi’s sophistication lies in the self-consciousness of his interpretive stance and his clarification of it to the reader. He tells us what he is doing and why. And the what and why are subject to ethical introspection and practice.²⁴

For the authors, then, Gandhi embodies a practitioner-scholar model of scholarship.

As I mentioned in the introduction, however, by employing a practitioner-scholar to counteract German Indological scholars’ mode of scholarship, the authors made Gandhi an easy target of modern scholarly biases against practitioner-scholars. For example, in a review

²⁰ Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, 8

²¹ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, 440

²² Adluri & Bagchee, *The Real Threat to the Humanities Today*, 4

²³ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Real Threat to the Humanities Today*, 4

²⁴ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Real Threat to the Humanities Today*, 4

on *The Nay Science*, Andrew Nicholson, Associate Professor at Stony Brook, charges that Adluri and Bagchee do not extend charity to German Indologists as much as they do to Gandhi. In Nicholson's words, "perhaps in the name of a corrective to previous injustices, the authors consistently deny the hermeneutical charity to their German objects of study."²⁵ They imply that the authors, being Indian, engage in an uncharitable reading of German scholars, which, they claim, resists Indian scholars.

In their response to Nicholson's book review, Adluri and Bagchee paint Nicholson's review as emblematic of the problem with scholarship in the humanities. According to the authors, Nicholson's review contains "as many misrepresentations" that they felt "an obligation to scholarship to respond."²⁶ Specifically, the authors argue that they did not submit Gandhi to the same criticism as German Indologists because Gandhi interpreted the *Gītā* unlike them. The primary complaint against Nicholson's review depicts his interpretation as embodying the type of pseudo-scholarship in the humanities they argue against in German Indology. As Goodnight succinctly puts it, "a scholar misses the main point of a book and gets all frustrated about it, so the authors have to come and show how their work is intended to make the critique the reviewer is complaining about!"²⁷ That scholarly misunderstanding, too easy to happen and which indicates a lack of rigorous philosophical hermeneutics, represents the real threat today to the humanities.

However, I insist that in using a practitioner-scholar to counteract the work of German Indologists, the book carries the guilt of naivete that other scholars may employ against them. Nicholson himself affirms that Gandhi's interpretation of the *Gītā* appears "biased from the

²⁵ Nicholson, *Review*, III

²⁶ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Real Threat to the Humanities Today*, 1

²⁷ Comment on this paper ☺

perspective of contemporary historiography.”²⁸ Strictly speaking, could the authors not find scholarship produced by a modern Indian philosopher who works within the modern university to function as an example?

Although the authors claim that “*The Nay Science* is not an easy book to review,”²⁹ they have nonetheless produced a book through which modern scholars can ponder questions about the sources of the theories and methods they employ in their current production of scholarship. By showing how German Indologists took for granted that the historical-critical method could produce scientific scholarship on the Indian Epic, they display how German Indologists failed to investigate their own biases and prejudices critically. Therefore, as Adluri and Bagchee assert that “it is not our practice to respond to reviews of our work... when a review contains as many misrepresentations... we feel an obligation to scholarship to respond,”³⁰ future scholars should thank the example they display in reviewing the many misrepresentations of the Indian Epic in German Indology’s centuries-long biased mode of scholarship.

²⁸ Nicholson, *Review*, III

²⁹ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Real Threat to the Humanities Today*, 16

³⁰ Adluri & Bagchee, *The Real Threat to the Humanities Today*, 1

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