“A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization”

In the late 18th and early to mid-19th century, the secular approach of certain German scholars towards the study of Sanskrit in Europe significantly impacted the creation of the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit at Harvard. This influence stood in stark contrast to the religious concerns of some English scholars. While these English academics were focused on assisting in converting Hindus to Christianity, their German counterparts were pioneering the field of comparative philology. This dynamic led to the establishment of the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford, the dominance of German scholars in teaching Sanskrit on the European continent, and the mentorship provided by German academics to early American scholars interested in studying India. These developments underscore the interplay between the secular, scholarly approach of German academics and the religious concerns of their English counterparts in the study of Sanskrit.

In 1832, the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford was established in response to English religious concerns. Colonel Boden, the benefactor of the Professorship, stipulated that its purpose was to provide "a more comprehensive and critical understanding of the Sanskrit language" to aid in converting the native people of India to Christianity (Symonds 103). Colonel Boden viewed Hindus as pagan worshippers, and he considered their civilization to be primitive and incompatible with Christian values, stating that it was "both dangerous and contrary to the Christian spirit" (McGetchin 35). The primary objective of the Boden Professorship was to equip Christian ministers with a practical knowledge of Sanskrit so they could translate the Bible into the sacred language of the Hindus. This effort aimed to make the Bible more appealing to Hindus and

encourage them to regard it as a holy text (Symonds 102). However, as Gombrich noted, English missionaries were disappointed when they observed that many Hindus still held their scriptures in higher regard than the Bible. This frustration led to the belief that "Satan led those outside the Church astray in a web of error," intensifying the Christian ministers' determination to combat Hindu heresies (Symonds 102). In essence, the establishment of the Oxford Professorship was driven by the desire to assist in the conversion of Hindus, as English religious concerns prompted the initiative.

The competition among English scholars vying for the prestigious Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford sheds light on the religious concerns of Colonel Boden. The selection committee grappled with a significant question: "Should they prioritize electing the most accomplished Sanskrit scholar or the candidate most likely to contribute to the spread of Christianity in India?" (Symonds 104). According to Gombrich, Horace Wilson emerged as a strong contender due to his extensive study of Sanskrit with local pundits in India (Gombrich 12-13). However, Wilson believed that the improvement of India would stem from a revival of its indigenous knowledge (Symonds 104). In contrast, his opponent, Reverend Robert Mill, aimed to undermine Wilson's candidacy by accusing him of being insufficiently devout and excessively focused on academic Sanskrit studies in India (Symonds 104). Despite Mill's attempts to tarnish Wilson's reputation, Oxford officials, as recounted by Gombrich, ultimately voted in favor of electing Wilson to the Boden Professorship. However, this decision was reached by a narrow margin, with only a seven-point difference (Gombrich 12). This margin reflects the missionary zeal and the prevailing nationalist sentiment in 19th-century England, as scholars perceive it. The

intense competition for the Boden Professorship at Oxford underscored the complex interplay between scholarly pursuit, religious motives, and nationalistic fervor during this period.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the English scholars' religious motivations, certain German scholars approached Sanskrit scholarship with a distinctly secular perspective. Germany, devoid of imperialist ambitions in India, nurtured scholars like Franz Bopp and August Wilhelm Von Schlegel, who were initially captivated by the Romantic allure of Sanskrit and the vast linguistic and philological possibilities it unveiled (McGetchin 76). It is worth noting that an Englishman named Alexander Hamilton contributed to the early Romantic fascination of these German scholars with his work, "On the Speech and Wisdom of the Indians." Hamilton, who happened to be a cousin of the American political leader, had taught Schlegel in Paris (Roche 1944) and later Franz Bopp. The latter eventually became the first professor of Sanskrit at the University of Berlin. One of Bopp's students, Max Mueller, aspired to secure the second Boden Professor of Sanskrit position at Oxford but was unsuccessful (Chaudhuri 41). Oxford officials were concerned about Mueller's potential appointment, fearing that it might lead to "a procession of German professors, with spectacles on their noses and pipes in their mouths, taking possession of our academic halls and raising questions about the divine inspiration of the Bible" (Symonds 105). In contrast, the English scholar Monier Williams aligned with Colonel Boden's religious concerns when he established the Boden Professorship (Gombrich 9). This contrast highlights the divergent approaches of German and English scholars in the study of Sanskrit during this period, with the former driven by secular curiosity and the

latter influenced by religious considerations.

As Oxford made efforts to discourage the proliferation of secular German scholarship within its academic circles, a growing number of American scholars turned their attention to German universities. Edward Salisbury played a pivotal role in this movement, inspiring his student, William Dwight Whitney, to embark on a journey to Germany and study under the guidance of Bopp in Berlin. Salisbury aimed to elevate American Sanskrit studies to the same level as the highest standards prevailing in continental Europe (Sinha 76). Salisbury had studied under Bopp in Berlin and held the first endowed chair of Sanskrit in America, the University Chair of Sanskrit at Yale, established in 1841. During this early period, American scholars were similarly captivated by a romantic fascination with India, akin to their German counterparts, which drew them to the study of Sanskrit. As Weir observes, these American scholars were among the earliest in the United States to approach the sacred texts of India with a sympathetic and balanced perspective, reflecting the influence of eighteenth-century rationalism in conveying lofty spiritual concepts (Weir 37). One notable practitioner of this approach was Henry Ware Wales, a Harvard College graduate. Wales eventually contributed the necessary funds to establish Harvard's Wales Professorship of Sanskrit in 1903. In this manner, American scholars, inspired by the academic rigor of their German counterparts and guided by a romantic curiosity about India, continued to shape the landscape of Sanskrit studies in the United States.

The name "Wales" was bestowed upon him in honor of the Unitarian minister Henry Ware, under whose roof the young Wales resided during his sophomore, junior,

and senior sophister years at Harvard College. He successfully graduated from Harvard in 1838. Following a request from his family, Wales pursued a medical education at Harvard Medical School, ultimately earning his MD degree in 1841. However, despite his medical qualification, as noted by Schaick, Wales chose not to practice medicine; instead, he embarked on a journey as a traveler and scholar (30). After attaining his MD, Wales embarked on a remarkable journey that took him to Europe and later to the Orient. During his European sojourn, he pursued studies at the University of Berlin, where the renowned scholar Bopp held the chair of Sanskrit. While historical records do not definitively confirm whether Wales studied under Bopp during his time in Berlin, as Bentinck-Smith suggests, Wales did develop a deep affinity for languages and literature during his stay. He became fluent in French, Italian, and German and studied Sanskrit and other Oriental languages (531). By his passing in 1856, Wales had left an enduring legacy. His bequest to the Harvard Library included nearly fifteen hundred books encompassing over a dozen languages, emphasizing Sanskrit (531).

The stipulations for establishing the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit at Harvard provided clear insight into Wales' intentions regarding the influence of the German secular approach on the position's holder. In his bequest, Wales articulated that the Professorship should be promptly established and filled, either by extending an invitation to a learned foreign scholar in Sanskrit Language and Literature or by carefully selecting an individual for this role and sending them to Germany and, if necessary, to India, to acquire the requisite qualifications (Bentinck-Smith 530). Wales further emphasized that no candidate should assume the position without obtaining a certificate attesting to their

competence from the Chief Professor of Sanskrit Language at one of the prestigious European universities, namely the University of London, Paris, or Berlin. It is worth noting that, during this era, German scholars held the Sanskrit chairs at all three of these esteemed institutions: Theodor Goldstucker in London, Julius Von Mohl in Paris, and Franz Bopp in Berlin. This arrangement underlined the pivotal role of German scholars in shaping the study of Sanskrit at that time.

Hence, the 19th-century German secular approach to Sanskrit study was pivotal in shaping the Wales Professorship of Sanskrit establishment at Harvard. Early American scholars of India shared in the romantic fascination that united them with their German counterparts, enabling them to explore Sanskrit more sophisticatedly despite prevailing English religious concerns. Several decades later, in his inaugural lecture as Boden Professor at Oxford in 1977, titled "A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization," Richard Gombrich made a thought-provoking observation about "The Bhagavad Gita." He noted that while the sentences within this sacred text are comprehensible, they contain many diverse doctrines, many of which are mutually inconsistent. Consequently, many religious teachers have found their teachings justified within its pages (25). Gombrich's insight advocates for an approach to scholarship that embodies respect for studying ancient civilizations, particularly when examining the sacred texts of Classical India. These texts may be open to various interpretations, but scholars are responsible for approaching them with the reverence they deserve as repositories of India's religious ideas.

Works Cited

Gombrich, Richard F. *On Being Sanskritic: A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1978. Print.

Symonds, Richard. *Oxford and Empire: The Last Lost Cause?* Oxford: New York: Clarendon; Oxford UP, 1991. Print.

McGetchin, Douglas T. *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth in Modern Germany*. Madison [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009. Print.

Sinha, Elmarsafy, Ziad, Bernard, Anna, and Attwell, David. *Debating Orientalism*. 2013. Print.

Bentinck-Smith, William, and Stouffer, Elizabeth. *Harvard University: History of Named Chairs: Sketches of Donors and Donations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Secretary to the U, 1991. Print.

Van Schaick, John. *Characters in Tales of a Wayside Inn*. Boston: Universalist House, 1939. Print.

Chaudhuri, Nirad C. *Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Müller*, P. C. New York: Oxford UP, 1974. Print.