

## Sir Charles Wilkins' Basic Contribution to Indology in the West

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The Western Renaissance in the fifteenth century began with the migration of Greek scholars to Europe from Turkey since 1453. Similarly, the Oriental Renaissance, with the studies of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit languages by Western scholars has been taking place over the last two and a half centuries. Nearly two hundred research scholars and Sanskritists devoted to classical studies in India facilitated the dissemination of India's sacred and secular culture to the West.

It was only when the English became firmly established as administrators in the land of Bharat that India's philosophy could be disseminated in England and other European nations. An essay on India's history and culture written by Alexander Dow in 1768, indicated that abundant but as yet unrevealed Sanskrit works were worthy of England's notice and study. The publication of Dow's essay was followed by two significant events. Firstly, the founding of the Asiatic Society in 1784 was an epoch-making event in the meeting of East and West on both the intellectual and spiritual levels. Sir William Jones (1746-1794) the first great Indologist and "father of Asian Studies" worked hard to disseminate India's spiritual treasures to the West through his books and the publication of the Society's journal, Asiatic Researches. We are concerned here with the second significant event, namely, the contributions of Sir Charles Wilkins (1750-1836) and his English translations of the Bhagavad Gita and Hitopadesha in London as well as his authoritative Sanskrit grammar, which appeared soon after in 1785 and 1787 and became the basis for all later Indological work.

Sir Charles Wilkins was born into a poor family, a stroke of fate that deprived him of a higher education. Still, he was ambitious and enterprising. At the age of twenty he went to India in 1770 by getting a "Writership" through the Junior Civil Service of the East India Company and also served as an assistant to the chief of the E. I. C. factory in Maldah. He was introduced to Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (1751-1830) and his acquaintance with him piqued Wilkins' curiosity and determination to study Sanskrit. Halhed, who knew Bengali, had prepared a rudimentary grammar of that language for the use of the staff of the East India Company in 1778. Prior to this grammar, William Bolts, a German civil servant in Europe, attempted to cast the Bengali type and failed. Only three other books had been printed in Bengali before 1778, all in Lisbon and all in Roman type. Wilkins wanted to publish Halhed's grammar, and with the skillful mold-casting assistance of Panchanan Karmakar was able to print and publish Grammar of the Bengali



Language in the same year that Halhed had prepared it. In this way, the East India Company printed its first Bengali grammar from the printing press of Master Andrews in Hooghly, West Bengal. This was possible because Wilkins had acquired some type casting experience in England and was the first to utilize the methods of engraving, casting and setting Bengali characters. Warren Hastings (1733-1818), the first governor-general of India, was a great patron of Sanskrit studies and heartily encouraged Wilkins to create the Bengali type and to study Sanskrit.

**Halhed wrote in the preface of his Bengali grammar about Wilkins' feat:**

In a country so remote from all connections with European artists, he has been obliged to charge himself with all the various occupations of the metallurgist, the engraver, the foundry man and the printer. To the merit of invention he was compelled to add application of personal labour. With a rapidity unknown in Europe, he surmounted all the obstacles which necessarily clog the first rudiments of a difficult art as well as disadvantages of solitary experiment.

Langlès' praise for Wilkins' "typographical masterpieces" (Bhagavat-Geeta and Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sharma) has been cited earlier. Referring to William Caxton (1412-1462), who earned immortality for pioneering English typesetting, he conferred upon Wilkins the epithet, "Caxton of Bengali types." Moreover, Wilkins manufactured Persian types. His success caused the East India Company to place him in charge of their press, from which government documents in Persian and Bengali were also printed.

Challenged by Halhed's Bengali grammar, Wilkins printed his own Bengali grammar in 1778—but went directly to the Sanskrit language to achieve it. He thus revealed the structure of languages secondary to Sanskrit and altered the course of linguistic history. This is remarkable in light of his humble beginnings. He was the first employee of the East India Company to learn Sanskrit, and initiated the new discipline of Sanskrit scholarship thanks to a request from Hastings that he study with Indian pundits at Benares (Varanasi), the traditional seat of Sanskrit learning. Hastings, whose love for learning allowed him to address Wilkins (officially his subordinate) as "friend," had also been able to overcome the reluctance of the hereditary priests of India to allow their scriptures to be read by mlecchas (foreigners). Hastings had prepared the *Vibadarnaba Setu* (Digest of Hindu Laws) with the help of the pundits and published it in London in 1776. Langlès adds further details in the preface to *Recherches asiatiques*:

It was in response to a direct summons from Hastings that the Brahmans versed in the Shastras . . . came to Calcutta from all parts of India. Gathering at Fort William and supplied with the most authentic texts, they drafted a comprehensive treatise on Indic law in the Hindu language. This was subsequently translated into Persian, and into English by Halhed under the title *Code of Gentoo Laws*. It was also under Hastings' auspices that

Charles Wilkins studied Sanskrit and had the distinction of publishing the first translation in a European language based directly on a Sanskrit text.

In 1783 Sir William Jones arrived in Calcutta and immediately devoted himself to Sanskrit and the translation of ancient Sanskrit texts. Initially, he had to overcome resistance from the Brahmins he approached to teach him. In his book, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, Arthur Versluis confirmed that Sir Jones had difficulty

gaining access to Hindu sacred books and Sanskrit, but could find no Brahmin willing to teach this unbelieving foreigner, and only with great effort was he able to find a Hindu physician who taught him enough Sanskrit to translate the *Laws of Manu* and the *Hitopadesha*, both of which were later influential on the transcendentalists.

The Hindu physician was Ram Lochan Kavibhushana, who was a Vaidya by caste. Sir Jones gave profound attention to his studies of India with a nobler purpose than that of his wealth-seeking contemporaries. He mastered Sanskrit during the last ten years of his life thanks to Wilkins, whose knowledge of Sanskrit had made a deep impression on his mind. Encouraged by Hastings and helped by Wilkins, Jones founded the Asiatic Society in Calcutta on January 15, 1784. Though he did not enjoy a good reputation in official circles within Great Britain, Hastings rendered signal service in the spread of India's valuable cultural insights as recorded in her Sanskrit scriptures. He was an educated man and was the first to be approached for the position of president of the Asiatic Society. When he refused, Jones became president.

In 1781 Wilkins had deciphered the Sanskrit inscription of a copper plate found in Bihar that belonged to the tenth-century King Bagrahapala Deva of Bengal. This, along with other Sanskrit stone inscriptions he deciphered, was published by the Asiatic Society in its official organ, *Asiatic Researches*, in 1788 and 1790. Wilkins' pioneering work in this area enabled historians to reconstruct the ancient Pala period of the history of Bengal. In 1794, Jones translated the remaining part of the *Manusamhita* that Wilkins had fully translated. He had read the entire original work three times. It was published with the title, *Institutes of Hindu Law, or the Ordinances of Manu According to the Glossary of Culluca*. A more recent version edited by W. E. Hopkins of Yale University is simply titled *The Ordinances of Manu*. Wilkins played a leading role in the formation of London's Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, founded by Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837). The contributions of Sir William Jones, Charles Wilkins and Colebrooke to the research of the Asiatic Society are memorable and display a broad range of study to fulfill their desire to understand India through Sanskrit and all things Indian. Their remarkable works, together with Anquetil-Duperron's *Oupnek'hat*, proved to be the greatest inspiration for Emerson, Thoreau, and other writers of the American Transcendental Movement.

It may be noted that Colebrooke was also employed by the East India Company in 1783 as secretary of the Indian Civil Service and later as a professor of Sanskrit and Hindu law at the College of Fort William in 1801. He became president of the Calcutta Court in

1805, before joining the Council of India in 1807. He returned to Europe in 1815 and donated his valuable collection of oriental manuscripts to the library of the East India Company. His most important work as an Indologist, *Essays on the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus*, is still relevant and admired today.

## **WILKINS' LOVE FOR THE BHAGAVAD GITA**

Wilkins loved the Bhagavad Gita wholeheartedly—he compared it to the Gospel of St. John of the New Testament. In 1785 his *Bhagvat Geeta*, the very first translation of the Gita into a European language, was printed in London at the direction of the East India Company upon the special recommendation of Warren Hastings. Hastings had a fascination for the Gita and he pursued the Court of Directors of the East India Company until the directors agreed to publish the work at the company's expense. In a learned preface Hastings wrote to Wilkins' work, he praised its literary merits and asserted that the study and true practice of the Gita's teachings would lead humanity to peace and bliss. The research of Gauranga Gopal Sengupta (b. 1913), a scholar and member of the Asiatic Society, confirms Hastings' great esteem for the Bhagavad Gita. In *Indology and Its Eminent Western Savants*, Sengupta writes:

Warren Hastings, while forwarding a copy of the Bhagavad Gita [by Wilkins] to the chairman of the East India Company, in course of an introduction stated that the work was “a performance of great originality, of a sublimity of conception, reasoning and diction almost unequalled, and single exception among all the known religions of mankind of a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines.”

Well aware of the Gita's universal bearing, Hastings included a prophetic expression in his preface:

The writers of the Indian philosophies will survive when the British Dominion in India shall long have ceased to exist, and when the sources which it yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, beautifully expressed the reasons he chose to study English works on Orientalism and wrote of their value to all thoughtful Englishmen:

By the law of contraries, I look for an irresistible taste for orientalism in Britain. For a self-conceited modish life, made up of trifles, clinging to a corporeal civilization, hating ideas, there is no remedy like the Oriental largeness. That astonishes and disconcerts English decorum. For once, there is thunder it never heard, light it never saw, and power which trifles with time and space. I am not surprised to find an Englishman like Warren Hastings, who had been struck with the grand style of thinking in the Indian writings, depreciating the prejudices of his countrymen while offering them a translation of the Bhagavat [Gita].

## **THE IMPACT OF CHARLES WILKINS' BHAGAVAT-GEETA**

The publication of Charles Wilkins' Bhagavad Gita (Bhagavat-Geetâ, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon), first translated into English under the auspices of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in November 1784 and later published in London in 1785, had a great impact on Europe. Raymond Schwab, in his study of the rediscovery of India and the East in Europe, wrote in *The Oriental Renaissance* that "no text could, by its profound metaphysics and by the prestige of its poetic casting, more irresistibly shake the hold of the tradition of a superior race." In 1795, Louis Matthieu Langlès, curator of oriental manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale and its provisional specialist on India; mentioned Wilkins in an article on the literary works of the English in India:

A single man is carrying out an undertaking that usually requires the collaboration of a large number of artists. His first attempts are typographical masterpieces. This truly amazing man, whose name merits a distinguished place in the list of benefactors of letters, is Charles Wilkins, a scholar deeply versed in Sanskrit and known in Europe for two works [Bhagavat-Geeta and Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sharma] he has translated from the sacred language of the Brahmans.

A short span of ten years had passed from the publication of Wilkins' Bhagavat-Geeta to the appearance of Langlès' article in the *Magasin Encyclopédique*. The brilliant translations of Sanskrit books from the Asiatic Society, prompted by Sir William Jones, were now well known in revolutionary France, despite the decrease in communications owing to dramatic historical events. Langlès continued to document Indic research and was well aware of the importance of the Society, which was dedicated to Oriental research and scholarship. He included a history and bibliography of the early publications of the Society in the third volume of the *Magasin Encyclopédique*.

In 1787, Abbé Parraud retranslated Wilkins' English version into French. In 1832, a French translation, made directly from Sanskrit by Jean-Denis Lanjuinais, was published posthumously. Lanjuinais had written of the "great surprise" it was "to find among these fragments of an extremely ancient epic poem from India . . . a completely spiritual pantheism . . . and . . . the vision of all-in-God . . . "

## **EMERSON RECEIVES THE GIFT OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA**

According to Swami Vivekananda, Emerson's greatest source of inspiration was "this book, the [Bhagavad] Gita. He went to see Carlyle, and Carlyle made him a present of the Gita; and that little book is responsible for the Concord [Transcendental] Movement. All the broad movements in America, in one way or other, are indebted to the Concord party." The book was an English translation of *The Bhagvat-Geeta* by Charles Wilkins. Carlyle gave no other book to Emerson during their first visit together and told him,

“This is a most inspiring book; it has brought comfort and consolation in my life—I hope it will do the same to you. Read it.” Carlyle accompanied Emerson to the railway station and gave him a copy of one of the earliest translations of the Bhagavad Gita, by Edwin Jones, as a gift. This Gita is preserved in the Emerson archives in Boston. Through Carlyle’s love for it, Emerson came to cherish the Gita.

Illness forced Wilkins to return to England in 1786, after sixteen years in India. He later fitted a printing press in Bath, England, with Devanagari characters. From this press, Wilkins’ Hitopadesha (1787) and Story of Shakuntala from the Mahabharata (1793) were printed. Wilkins went so far as to become Librarian of the East India Company’s London library in 1799. As a leading Indologist in charge of the famous India Office Library, Wilkins collected a large number of manuscripts from India; these formed its core collection. His Grammar of the Sanskrit Language was printed from London (after a fire consumed his press) in 1808. In 1815, he also published Radicals of the Sanskrit Language containing verb roots, in London. Both grammars were welcomed by students of Sanskrit. It is interesting to note here that the first Sanskrit curriculum in England was probably introduced in 1805 by the East India Company at Haileybury College—Charles Wilkins had been appointed “examiner and visitor” there—but Sanskrit was taught only to train English civil servants.

The Société Asiatique de Paris, was founded in 1821, two years before the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland was created in London. On April 1, 1822, Silvestre de Sacy (1755-1838), who founded the first European chair of Sanskrit in 1815 at the Collège de France in Paris, chaired the first general meeting. Paris became the first European city to officially provide teaching of the Sanskrit language and thus to follow the example laid down by the Asiatic Society in Calcutta. Some of the associates of the Société included Charles Wilkins, Horace Wilson and Colebrooke from England, and Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Franz Bopp (who founded the study of comparative philology in 1816) and Friedrich and August von Schlegel (eminent pioneers in Indian studies) from Germany.

The essence of Hindu thought, as elegantly and concisely put forth in the Bhagavad Gita, was disseminated throughout all of Europe thanks to Wilkins’ translation. His Gita was later translated into all major languages and reached a universal audience. Several scholarly organizations conferred honors upon him: in 1788 the Royal Asiatic Society of London elected him to membership, in 1805 he received a doctorate in Civil Law from Oxford, and in 1833 King George IV knighted him.

Dedicated western scholars such as Sir Charles Wilkins all share boundless esteem for the comprehensive, subtle, and brilliant Hindu mind. They belong to a unique group of Western seekers, indomitable, persevering, and devoted to the quest for the immortal Truth expressed by India’s saints and sages.

## ***ENDNOTES***

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