

The Battle for Sanskrit: Is Sanskrit Political or Sacred, Oppressive or Liberating, Dead or Alive?

Author: Rajiv Malhotra

Reviewed by a legendary Professor V.V. Raman, Emeritus Professor of Physics and Humanities, Rochester Institute of Technology, and author of more than a dozen books.

Simply put, the book explores those aspects of the academic field of Indology that irritate a growing number of Hindus who are beginning to regard Indology, not as a scholarly pursuit (which it is meant to be), but as a hyper-critical, vicious, and sometimes sinister enterprise directed at their traditions, worldviews, and religion. In this mode, argues the author, Indology does not shed light on Indic culture and Sanskrit studies, but does much harm to it. ...

Its central refrain is that Indology, especially of the past few decades at the hands of some reputed professors in American Academia has snatched away from practicing Hindus a discipline that properly belongs to Hindus; and that American Indology has subjected sacred Sanskrit writings to profane vivisections, diluting and distorting their contents. More seriously, it has injected its cold and unfeeling approach in the minds of countless unwitting Hindus. Not content with their disturbing commentaries from a distance, some American Indologists have also been meddling in the cultural and political affairs of the Hindu world within India (such as the Barbri-masjid issue and Dalit unrest), advising and instigating Hindus on such matters. The book eloquently responds to some of the critiques of Indic culture from the pen of American Indologists. The book learnedly and meticulously illustrates its contentions from the writings of some well-known American Indologists, in particular Professor Sheldon Pollack of Columbia University, NY. It is no secret that Professor Pollack has devoted decades of his life to the study of Hinduism. He has written extensively on the subject, and has received many tokens of appreciation and high praise from Hindus in India as well as from NRIs.

Some key theses in the book

1. Whereas Chinese studies are managed largely by Chinese scholars, Japanese studies by Japanese scholars, Arabic studies by Arab scholars, etc., a good deal of Hindu studies are conducted and directed by Westerners, mainly affiliated to American universities.

Some may say: that this is so after more than sixty years of Indian independence is a reflection as much on Hindu thinkers as on scheming by American Indologists. But this is precisely what Malhotra is revealing.

2. Unwitting Hindus who get doctoral degrees from American universities have fallen prey to the approaches and interpretations of their ill-wishing non-Hindu gurus.

3. The root of the problem lies in the fact that whereas in the Hindu approach one is sensitive to and respectful of both worldly (*vyavaharika*) and spiritual (*paramarthika*) dimensions of human experience, the outsider's (Westerner's) approach is bereft of anything spiritual, relying solely on a heartless rational reduction of everything, resulting in a picture of the tradition that is often absurd, anachronistic, and even grotesque.

4. Distorted views of Hinduism are propagated through books, lectures, and college courses: an enterprise in which a good many Hindus naively and shamelessly participate, both within India and beyond the shores of India.

5. Influential books and commentaries written from alien *nástika* perspectives not only devalue classical Sanskrit writings – the Vedas, the shastras, the puranas, the prasthanatrayi, etc. - they undermine the very foundations of a culture that has enriched generations of Hindus and survived the onslaught of inimical invaders who have systematically engaged in committing cultural genocide of the Hindu world.

6. Assertions to the effect that Sanskrit is a dead language, that it is the root cause of violent responses of Hindus when their culture, religion, and country are attacked, that the epics are no more than literary instigations against Non-Hindus are gross abominations against Sanskrit epics and tradition, spread by modern Indologists in American academia.

7. There is a concerted effort by Western scholars, dating back to Max Müller et al., and now rampant in American academia, to decry, denigrate, and defame Hindu civilization. This is an enterprise in which a good number of trained Hindus (pejoratively described as sepoys) participate.

8. Sanskrit is more than a language: it is the substratum of the dharmic culture on which Indic civilization is built. To disrespect and dissociate the sacredness of Sanskrit is equivalent to shaking the foundations of dharma. Hindus must collectively fight the usurpation of Sanskrit studies by Western/American Indologists.

9. There are key terms and concepts in Sanskrit that are unique to the culture. These are often mistranslated or approximately translated, leading to further confusion in efforts to understand the rich, complex, and sophisticated Hindu culture.

10. To inject more dynamism into Sanskrit, new word-books of Sanskrit terms and phrases of relevance to the modern world must be published. Scholars should write prose and poetry, plays and essays in Sanskrit.

Possible reactions to the call

Of the many deep insights and reflections in the book, perhaps the most important and urgent is, as noted earlier, the call for Hindus to take over Indology/Sanskrit-studies from Western scholars and from Hindu commentators who have been trained by them. This may not be an altogether original idea, but this is the first of its kind to be so frankly and fearlessly articulated with clarity, cohesion, conviction, erudition, and extensive quotations from the undesirable authors.

It is very possible that Western scholars, irrespective of their motivations, will recognize that they are simply not welcome in the study of Indic culture. If they are not jolted into the recognition that time has come for them to retreat from their inquisitiveness about India with their outsider-lenses, they are likely to be made even more uncomfortable in the decades to come. The passion with which these matters are discussed in Malhotra's books will only inflame a vast number of Hindus who may not be scholars in the field, who may not have even read the authors in question, but who feel deeply about their culture and religion. Already some American Indologists have become *persona non grata* in India, and their books have been put on the anathema list. This may be only the beginning of more unpleasantness to come.

Malhotra is a rare instance of an activist-scholar. His dedication to the cause has already elicited much applause from countless Hindus who love their religion and tradition. His goal of seeking Hindu independence from Non-Hindus who are prying into Hinduism is being discussed in many academic institutions in India. His book is a significant contribution to achieving the goal of asserting one's own *adhikara* (authority) over one's heritage and culture.

No matter how Western Non-Hindu Indologists plead their case, they are likely to find little support from among the growing class of Hindus who are made to see through Malhotra's writings what may be called the dark side of Indology. Hindus who differ from Malhotra's views on some of these matters dare not speak for non-traditional perspectives, let alone on behalf of Western scholars because they are likely to be ridiculed and caricatured, if not condemned as treasonous. A number of Hindus are already facing public condemnation on this score in internet debates.

I am greatly impressed by Malhotra's deep devotion to Hindu culture which has inspired him to write his many books on the threats it is facing in the modern world. I also give him high marks for his historical insights, extensive scholarship, and well-framed arguments against the charges brought by alien critics of the Hindu world.

Other aspects of the topic

Having said all this I would note the following, not as criticisms of the book, but as some related perspectives relevant in the context of these discussions.

On *vyavaharika* and *paramarthika*: It is true that in the Hindu framework this important distinction is often made, and the vast majority of traditional Indic thinkers subscribe to this dual richness in the human experience. But this dichotomy is not unique to the Hindu world. Christians and Muslims also make a difference in their own ways between lived first-order reality and a world of transcendental truths corresponding to the Hindu. Indeed, what differentiates modern from pre-modern perspectives is that the former explicitly rejects *paramarthika*. Malhotra's criticism that this approach distorts and diminishes mainstream Hindu perspectives is absolutely correct. However, this happens with Christianity and other traditional religions as well. Commentaries on religious texts often sound hollow and disrespectful when their spiritual dimensions are absent, ignored or belittled.

In all dynamic cultures thinkers have arisen who have challenged the paradigm of received wisdom. Charvaka was the most outstanding example of this school of thought in classical India. Some even count the Buddha in this regard.

This is what distinguishes Hinduism from most other major religions. In other religions, if a member of the faith questions or rejects the supernatural, he/she is automatically kicked out of the fold or dealt with more severely. In Hinduism this is not the case. There are countless Hindus today who are respectful of the aesthetic, meaningful, and festival aspects of their religion without subscribing to its ethereal and metaphysical doctrines.

Unfortunately many of the dissenters from orthodoxy have been writing in English. So they seem to be imitators of alien unfriendly characters, rather than Hindus who are expressing their right to think differently from ancient worldviews. It is important not to ascribe free, rationalist, and nature-based interpretations of the world only to Western thinkers and their slavish imitators. There are many Chinese, Japanese, and Korean thinkers who also subscribe to this view.

Malhotra's thesis that Hindus have been so brainwashed by Western education that they are unable to view their own culture with an insider's perspective is perceptive and very valid. But this is equally true of Westerners in their post-European-Enlightenment phase. Millions of them have been so brainwashed by the so-called modern thinkers that they are unable to look into their own traditional culture from the insider (pre-Enlightenment) perspective.

In modern times there have been many keen Indians, such as Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Meghnad Saha, M. N. Roy, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, E. V. Ramaswami Nayakar, Brahmananda Swami Sivayogi, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, as well as thousand of members of the *Indian Rationalist Association* who reject and even denied/deny the existence of paramathmika. They were/are all as Hindu as their traditionally devout co-religionists.

As Kalidasa wisely reminded us,
Puránamityeva na sádhu sarvam, na chápí kávyam navamityavadyam
Not everything old is good, not everything new is bad.

It seems to me unfortunate and unfair that Malhotra, in his frustration at Hindus who choose to adopt a materialist view in philosophical/traditional matters, castigates them with demeaning epithets. There are any number of Westerners, born and brought up in Judeo-Christianity, who have embraced Hindu spirituality at a later stage of their lives: From Annie Besant and Sister Nivedita to Swami Agehananda Bharati and quite a few others in our own times. Would it be fair or appropriate for Christians to decry them as having slavishly fallen prey to Eastern mysticism?

On Indologists: While everything stated in the book regarding current trends in Indology is appropriate and needs to be said, one cannot – indeed one should not – ignore or suppress the positive contributions of Western scholars to the field of Indic studies. Through their explorations – biased and often with self-serving motivations – they founded the disciplines of Egyptology, Sinology, Indology, etc. which brought to light troves of treasures that remained buried underground and/or faded from humanity's collective memory. Few Hindus in the eighteenth century had even heard of Aryabhata and the Bhaskaras, Caraka and Shushruta, let alone known about Ashoka Stupa, Ajanta Caves, Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

In 1834 Charles Matthew Whish, a British employee of the East India Company, published a paper in *The Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, where he wrote: "Kerala mathematicians had. . . laid the foundation for a complete system of fluxions. . . and their works. . . abound with fluxional forms and series to be found in no work of foreign countries." This was resuscitated and explored further by a scholar from Kerala affiliated to the University of Manchester towards the close of the twentieth century.

Western Indologists not only brought to light many hidden gems of Hindu and Buddhist India, they also made them available to the world at large, thereby alerting the West of aspects of ancient India's greatness of which they, like other Hindus, had been totally ignorant. I say this in the spirit of giving the devil his due, not for defending the negative aspects of Indology.

Let me reiterate that nothing of what I am saying here is to condone the untenable and deprecating writings of Non-Hindu Indologists that are explicitly detailed in this book, much less to argue that Sanskrit studies must continue to be in the hands of those who have no insider-experience of Vedic tradition. I would emphasize that all commentators on religions must realize that the religious framework embodies cultural certitudes that only the initiated can experience and embrace. There is no religion without the poetry of symbols that add to the

aesthetics, and the metaphor of parables that convey the esoteric meanings implicit in the abstract resonance of revealed truths. Scholars who don't recognize this are like color-blind connoisseurs who appraise a painting splashed on a black and white TV screen, unable to experience the chromatic splendor of the original. They just don't get it (all).

Analytical inquiry is fruitless reveals aspects of what is studied that are opaque to emotive involvement. The Ramayana as literature and the Gita as a philosophical work don't give a tenth of the spiritual ecstasy that bhajans and chants offer, but they take us to different realms that are rich in their own ways. As with the wave-particle duality of the electron, the more we focus on one aspect – the experiential or the analytical – the more the other gets blurred. In saying that one or the other is the whole truth one loses half of what the work has to offer.

Scholars in the West have dissected their own culture from profane (non-sacred) perspectives, and have enriched their intellectual-spiritual heritage in the process. Perhaps they don't have the right to do this with other cultures. In Hamlet's phrase, there's the rub. If they do, they can expect reactions like this book, with more of its kind to come. At the same time, thinkers within any culture would do well to examine their own culture from perspectives that make them more relevant in the twenty-first century.

On mining from Sanskrit: There is much truth in the statement that “westerners from many other disciplines and walks of life are mining ancient Sanskrit for its philosophical sophistication, spiritual guidance, and potential for expanding systematic knowledge in fields ranging from physics to mind sciences,” especially in the fields of philosophy, epistemology, psychology and the cognitive sciences. But I doubt that practicing physicists (that includes Hindu physicists from S. N. Bose and C. V. Raman to S. Chandrasekhar and G. Sudarshan) mine Sanskrit writings for their research in current physics. That is not how physics progresses. Even if some do, that is minimal compared to how much Hindus mine from the Western knowledge base in modern science. Many things that abundantly enrich India today: from electromagnetism and nuclear energy to computers and you-tube, let alone the violin, the harmonium, and cricket, are from the West. Universal science and knowledge are for all humanity to mine from and contribute to. The universal wisdom in Sanskrit belongs to this category.

The Rohan Murty Library Project: This has become another controversy provoked by this book. The goal is to translate Indian literary works from various Indian languages into English and present them via Harvard University. It is unfortunate that Indians are still seeking shelter and recognition from Western universities and the English language to publicize their culture and civilization. Harvard would do well, as did another university in California, to say “Thanks, but no thanks!” to Indian millionaires who want to establish Hindu chairs in the West, and ask them to better use that money to establish pátashalas in India to educate Hindus on their culture and civilization: an enterprise that was thwarted by Thomas Babington Macaulay.

Concluding Thoughts

All said and done, the vast majority of practicing Hindus, especially those that don't speak English, don't need or read the commentaries of Western scholars on their religion except when they are drawn to them by books like ***The Battle for Sanskrit***. Even if they do read such books, their own faith, inclinations, and commitments are not likely to be adversely affected by what American scholars say about the Ramayana, the Gita, Lord Ganesha or Saint Ramakrishna.

Nevertheless, ***The Battle for Sanskrit*** is a book of enormous value, significance, and relevance. Many have heard the opening line of Rudyard Kipling's ***The Ballad of East and West***. But it is worth recalling its first four lines:

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!

In Kipling's era the twain could never have met, because both were not equally strong. But today East and West stand face to face as two strong (free) men. Now they can talk as equals without feeling superior or inferior. That is what we are witnessing in our own times. Malhotra's voice is a bold stance that the East (Hindu India) is taking vis-a-vis the West, saying, “Stop it! Our culture and religion are not toys for you to play with in the ivory towers of your universities.” The West has no choice but to listen with respect and some contrition. As a result of this book, Indology as a discipline may be discontinued and disbanded, or its paradigm will be significantly shifted.

Like Sri Aurobindo of an earlier era Rajiv Malhotra is reminding his co-religionists that there are profound truths and spiritual richness in classical Vedic visions. Except for his antagonism for the West, he is the Hindu equivalent of G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis and other Christian thinkers who brought out effectively the deeper roots of their tradition to their people and won millions of followers. At the very least the Hindu world should be deeply grateful to him for his tireless commitment to the cause. Indeed, he is likely to be declared a modern rishi, and deservedly so.

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Voyage through Indic Tradition

Truth and Tension in Science and Religion