

The State of Indological Studies in the UK today.

The title of this paper is that which I was assigned when Mr. Bloomfield first honoured me with an invitation to participate in this colloquium. I am sorry that there has been some slippage in the wording since then, so that I am billed to speak on library resources for Indology. I shall stick to my original brief, both because many others present are better qualified to speak of library resources, and are indeed doing so, and because I welcome the opportunity to speak of what is going on outside the libraries. It may be useful for librarians to learn whom they can expect to be catering for, and to learn something of the broader intellectual and institutional context of British Indology today.

Our main problem is dearth. If we also have a problem of quality, I would ascribe that too to the problem of quantity: it is difficult to sustain high quality on a very narrow quantitative base. Intellectual communities tend to be somewhat like pyramids, all rising at much the same angle, so that the heights they attain depend on their size. Though traditions of excellence by definition produce and are perpetuated by individual stars, they can hardly be maintained without accompanying traditions of sound academic support. Brilliant ideas require the data base of works of reference, dictionaries and catalogues, the compilation of which requires not brilliance but long hours of competent and dedicated labour. The inspiration of a few depends on the perspiration of many. So let me first explain our problem of quantity.

I take it as axiomatic that the foundation of sound Indology is laid by learning the relevant languages. I shall take as my working definition of Indology the study of matters Indian through the medium of Indian languages, though to avoid clashing with Professor Low I shall pay less attention to modern studies.

A student in Britain can take a BA in Sanskrit (optionally with Middle Indo-Aryan languages, also known as Pali and the other Prakrits) in a course which lasts 3 years (Oxford, Cambridge) or about the equivalent of that at Edinburgh, where the total length of the first degree course (known as M.A.) is 4 years but the first 2 years are less specialized. At London University, which in the context of this paper is to say at SOAS, the Sanskrit BA course takes 4 years, though it appears at the time of writing that there may be problems in sustaining this in the future. At SOAS, one can also take a BA degree, a 3 year course, in a range of modern Indian languages (see below). Outside SOAS the only degree course in which a modern Indian language is a major component is the Cambridge BA in Indian Studies with concentration in Hindi. Elementary Sanskrit is taught in several university departments of Indian religion (e.g., Bristol, Lancaster), and other elementary courses are available at various places, but to my knowledge none of these amount to more than the equivalent of a single term's full-time work.

The British student who has won an undergraduate place at a university is entitled to a grant from public (ratepayers') money, on a means-tested scale. Those who do very well in their first degrees may then be awarded a government (DES) grant for further study, at the most for 3 years. SOAS and Oxford offer some masters' degrees, one- or two-year taught courses, of which an Indian

language is an integral component. A student on such a course will use up part of the 3 years of state funding available, and so is unlikely to proceed to a research degree unless he has private means. Moreover, British universities charge fees far higher than do those on the Continent, even without the supplement which the government levies on overseas (i.e. non-EEC students). The rates for 1985-6 are £520 for 'home' undergraduates, £1,632 for 'home' graduates, £3,310 minimum for all overseas students; and on top of these university rates Oxford and Cambridge colleges charge fees of the order of £1000 per annum for graduates and £2000 per annum for undergraduates.

In effect, all this means that it is very hard even to embark on Indological research unless one has acquired the necessary languages as an undergraduate. There is a tiny number of further awards (e.g., Junior Research Fellowships at Oxbridge colleges) available to finance study in the humanities after the 3 years of DES grant; Indologists compete for these with those in other subjects.

Indology departments do not suffer only from financial constraints. There are now numerical limits imposed on the number of home (i.e., EEC) students an institution may accept at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and these quotas are further divided into quotas for colleges, faculties and departments.

A student who manages to do Indological research, perhaps even to complete a thesis, then faces the problems of publication and of employment. I shall not dwell on publication, because to most of my audience this problem will be obvious. But some of our Continental colleagues may be unaware that this country has no scheme of state subsidy for learned publications in general or for doctoral dissertations in particular; nor, of course, do British universities require such publication before awarding a doctorate. The award of a doctorate is supposed to mean, and I think it usually does mean, that the work is deemed to deserve publication, at least in part. Yet I would confidently guess that no more than half the Indological research produced for higher degrees in Britain since the war has been published. One of the best things we have managed to do at Oxford in recent years has been to institute the Oxford South Asia monograph series, published by OUP India; they have already produced a dozen theses, which they can market more successfully than could a British publisher -- in fact, the series is in the black.

Employment. Though professional employment as an Indologist is not a sufficient condition for producing research, it is nowadays a virtually necessary one: modern societies support very few gentleman scholars. At the moment there are in British universities 6 full-time posts for teaching Sanskrit and one for Middle Indo-Aryan. There are about half a dozen further teaching posts in Indology departments for which good Sanskrit is an essential pre-requisite, and about a dozen further posts requiring reasonable Sanskrit or Pali (though with little opportunity to teach those languages) in university departments of theology and religious studies.

In modern Indian languages I believe that apart from the Cambridge lectureship in Hindi the only posts are at SOAS.

Reckoning in terms of "full-time equivalents", there are at the moment 10 posts there in Modern South Asian languages, covering 9 languages; but enforced economies have imposed a plan that these figures should gradually be reduced to 8 posts and 6 languages, of which only Hindi and Urdu (3 each) will carry a full-time post. A half-post for Tamil is the sum of British universities' establishment for Dravidian languages; there are to be half-posts also for Bengali, Nepali and Gujarati.¹ For Tibetan (not strictly a South Asian language and so not included in the above figures) there is a single post, again at SOAS. There must be employed in universities about a score of anthropologists who have done fieldwork in the subcontinent, and perhaps a dozen modern historians who use Indian languages in their own research, but like their counterparts in departments of religious studies they rarely have occasion or opportunity to teach language.

There is one university teaching post in Britain for Indian music and one for Indian art and archaeology. There are perhaps a dozen historians of Indian art employed in museums.

This leaves the librarians. Since the number of librarians in British libraries who are qualified to pursue Indological research may well reach double figures, they are one of the largest groups of professional Indologists. It is therefore highly desirable that they should forswear any false modesty: they must not content themselves with an ancillary role, but come forward as scholars in their own right. They must take the lead in telling the world what can be learnt from the contents of their libraries.

For this brief survey has sufficed to show that for every scholar employed in Britain to do Indological research, British libraries hold thousands of manuscripts, tens of thousands of books and periodicals. I am the first to appreciate that our great libraries are cast by history to play international roles and to supply the needs of scholars from all over the world; but my concern here is to put the British research effort into perspective. As I have already hinted, even a university post is far from being a free license to pursue research. The dozen or so people who hold a teaching post in some aspect of classical Indology and their modernist colleagues are paid to spend their time in teaching and research. The teaching is rarely a sinecure, and most of us have little or no time for research during term. In addition to those stated duties, as librarians know all too well, a great part of one's time is spent in administration, an even heavier and more urgent duty in these days, when one's first efforts have to be devoted to warding off retrenchment or (if possible) to mitigating its effects.

Ever since the subject began in Europe, both France and Germany have employed several times as many scholars in Indology as Britain; even Holland (now alas also retrenching) has had more Sanskritists. With such puny patronage, British achievements have not been discreditable. Until the 1950s there were even fewer jobs for Indologists than there are now, though conditions were not quite so difficult for the amateur or part-time scholar. In the 1960s and early 1970s there was a general expansion of British universities; it is to those unusually favourable circumstances that I and most of my Indological colleagues, especially those in departments of

religious studies, owe our jobs. Our struggle at the moment is not to expand but to hold on to the gains of those two decades.

I turn now from the quantity of British Indological research to its character. This is not the place to praise individual achievements, much as I am tempted to do so; I shall rather attempt some general considerations.

Since the main expansion in Indologists' employment came in departments of religious studies -- and Indian religion has even found a place in the curriculum of a few polytechnics and teachers' training colleges -- it is not surprising that religion has recently been the most active area of British Indological research. A growing interest in Indian religion is after all also a secular trend; it is religious interest which attracts many students to study India. The other area in which British Indology shows strength, within its limited means, is historical linguistics. In virtually all other areas, the shortage of expertise is acute. In my inaugural lecture, nearly 8 years ago, I drew attention to the shortage of expertise in the skills essential for the study of Indian history: epigraphy, palaeography, numismatics; and in other such technical subjects as Indian astronomy, mathematics, medicine and music.² I might now add that even Sanskrit poetry, drama and literary theory are desperately thin on the ground. In many of the subjects I have just listed Britain has one or two scholars who are competent or even expert; but it is hard for a specialization to survive under such circumstances, not only because of the pressures of loneliness and the lack of stimulation from colleagues, but also for such banal reasons as that a research student needs a supervisor and two examiners.

Traditionally, most Indologists (and other orientalist) in Britain come to Sanskrit after a training in the (western) classics, perhaps through an interest in comparative philology. The assumption in classical studies had long been that anyone who learnt classical Greek was thereby qualified to discuss Plato or Thucydides; it was not necessary to acquire expertise in another discipline, such as philosophy or history, perhaps because Plato and Aristotle were the foundations of philosophy, Herodotus and Thucydides the foundations of historiography as we conceive it in the West. Indology was approached with similar assumptions. On the positive side, classical training has produced high standards of textual scholarship, an awareness of the need for linguistic competence and a respect for accuracy and careful use of evidence. On the other hand, the idea that any general training in logic and epistemology might be necessary in order to do good work on Indian logical texts has -- to take but one example -- been somewhat alien. However, British scholars were not often aware of the cultural parochialism of their outlook. While justly suspicious of comparative studies on the reasonable grounds enunciated by Arthur Darby Nock ("In order to compare two religions it is as well to know at least one of them"),³ they in fact indulged in them unawares. Every branch of Indian culture, from philosophy to literature, was judged by standards unconsciously absorbed from western classical models, so that Indian epics were criticised for not being Homer or Vergil, Indian drama for not being Sophocles or Shakespeare. It is not surprising, then, that British scholarship has generously been at its best in areas comparatively free from the realm of value

judgments, such as historical linguistics and archaeology. The attempt to understand India's intellectual achievements in terms of her own traditions (which need not involve cultural relativism) is rather recent, and I think owes much to the broadening influence of anthropology. The attempt to absorb Indian standards of taste before passing judgment on Indian aesthetic products is still but inchoate; in so far as it exists, I suspect that it may result from the presence of Indians in our society.

This poses an educational dilemma. An easy way to avoid such old-fashioned parochialism is to ignore the western classics -- indeed, not to teach western culture at all. But in my view that remedy is far worse than the disease, for it will only produce people with no culture at all. Western scholars cannot be turned into cultured Indians within a 3-year B.A. course. When I found that a student to whom I was teaching Kalidasa had never read any Shakespeare, I told him to go away and do that first.

For us in the West to study Indian civilization cannot but be a comparative enterprise. We had better be aware of that fact and render it more explicit. Every facet of a foreign culture takes on life and meaning for a student only in so far as he is able to relate and compare it to his own.

Thus it is that what I miss most in British Indology is what the French call haute vulgarisation, works written without a debasement of intellectual standards in a manner which renders them accessible to the general educated public. Everyone who has tried to recommend books to non-specialists knows how short we are of books at this level, except perhaps in the field of religion. I regard this lack as both an effect of the tiny scale of British Indology and, taking the long view, as a cause of it. For how are intelligent schoolchildren and other potential customers for our wisdom likely to become attracted to the subject if there is so little attractive writing to whet their interest?

I am not talking only about secondary literature. Penguin Classics have made a start, but there are still far too few English translations of Sanskrit works which can be understood, let alone enjoyed, by non-specialists. India has yet to find its Arthur Waley.

Let me return to the educational dilemma. I have rejected the option of teaching Indian culture to western students without caring whether they know anything of their own. In an ideal world the university teacher of Indology, confronted with students who have learnt nothing at school of their own cultural heritage, would make sure that they read both Kalidasa and Shakespeare. A student interested in a given area of Indian culture, say philosophy, would be taught both the language to give him direct access to his sources and the discipline to enable him to tackle them in the terms which make sense to comparable specialists in our culture, say logicians or metaphysicians. But where is the time for all this? SOAS is now teaching BA courses in which a modern Indian language has to be combined with a discipline, such as history or anthropology. In my own experience, some of the best work has been produced by graduates with good degrees in a traditional discipline who started Sanskrit or Pali only at graduate level; but of course

such people have to be exceptionally gifted linguists if they are to be able first to learn enough of the language and then apply their knowledge before the funding runs out. There is no easy answer.

I fear that the assembled librarians may find these remarks neither relevant nor encouraging. What would I like to see our libraries doing?

Obviously we hope that librarians will keep up their good work in acquisitions; we can only pray that the falling value of the pound will not bring catastrophe. The Times has carried (23.2.85) an alarming report that poverty may soon force the British Library -- far the best funded purchaser among our Indological libraries -- to charge fees to readers if it is to maintain accessions; the Bodleian reached this point several years ago. We hope also that the problems of information and distribution which make us comparatively poor in South Indian publications can be overcome; maybe this will be discussed in another session.

Obviously we hope that the work of cataloguing can be vigorously pursued: that manuscripts can be catalogued at last, that union catalogues can make holdings more accessible. We realize that here too the crucial bottleneck is skilled manpower -- though the cost of printing catalogues once they are compiled is a further problem.

But I would look beyond these perennial learned concerns, and say that in my opinion we must popularize or perish. I return to my main theme; popular appreciation is the true broad base of my pyramid. We must try to make the term Sanskrit at least as well known in Britain as it is in France or Germany, not just a jocular paradigm for obscurity. Librarians must help us to sell the wares of Indology to the public. I was delighted, for example, to see the splendid contributions made by London librarians to the 1982 Festival of India; and I hope no one will find it invidious if I single out for praise Jerry Losty's BL exhibition of "The art of the book in India" and the catalogue which was its permanent contribution to scholarship and to public enjoyment. The best we can do is to try to maintain the momentum generated by such events. To give the British public a keener and better informed interest in India is a long struggle in which the advances are less easily spotted than the setbacks. But it is the only way to build up that widespread support which in a democratic society is the only long-term guarantee that our subject will be allowed to flourish.

FOOTNOTES:

1. I am grateful to Dr. Christopher Shackle of SOAS for this information.
2. On Being Sanskritic: A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978), p.28.
3. An oral tradition I picked up at Harvard c. 1962.

*Richard Gombrich,
Oxford.*