

Schlegel and the Beginning of Comparative Linguistics in Europe*

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Abstract—Schlegel is one of the most famous thinkers and writers of the 19th century in Germany. This period was interesting because of the spiritual situation which Europe was in and which could be characterized as crisis. It was evident for many outstanding people of that time who tried to find a way out of that. Such way out many of them saw in ancient philosophical and religious thought of India. This cultural phenomenon is known also as Oriental Renaissance. Schlegel was one of the thinkers who represent that. He tried not only to find similarities between European and Indian philosophical thought, religion and culture, but supposed that India was the mother of European spirituality as such. He found a proof to that also in languages. That was the main reason of Schlegel's interest to linguistics. He had a great scientific success in this field of knowledge. In fact he created and developed the concept of linguistic affinity and was the first thinker who tried to build foundations of comparative linguistics as science.

Keywords—Schle; comparative linguistic; Schopenhauer; Oriental Renaissance; India; philosophy; religion; spirituality; Europe

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary European world there was an increasing interest in Far Eastern cultures since the middle of the 20th century. This is due to a number of reasons and, above all, because of an interest of human beings in everything which is foreign, incomprehensible, as well as discovering of new information about other cultures. Today we see this interest on all fronts — in interest in languages, literature and music, philosophical and spiritual traditions of the Far Eastern cultural region, as well as their folk clothes, cooking style etc. And in this process, India is not just as good as its currently more influential neighbors — China and Japan - but in some respects even occupies a privileged position. This is due to the fact that Chinese and Japanese cultures are certainly fascinating and very attractive for Europeans, but what is the most attractive in them that is precisely their cardinal difference from European culture and thus their incomprehensibility. With India it is not the case. In Indian culture Europeans see something familiar, something, what stands very closely to the basis of European

culture itself. It reflects above all in affinity of languages belonging to the same language group. And given the fact that Indian culture is much more ancient than European, it is often tried to convince us that India is, if not the motherland of all mankind, then at least those peoples who later laid the foundations of Western European culture. However, it should be noted that such an opinion, which is very popular in our time, did not originate today or yesterday, but much earlier, at the turn of the 18th — 19th centuries. It is this time period that we can consider to be decisive in the history of the formation of European intellectuals studies of the religious, literary and philosophical heritage of India as well as studies of Sanskrit. We can consider that time also as a beginning of the development of comparative linguistics as such.

II. FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL AND ORIENTAL RENAISSANCE

It would not be too great exaggeration to say that the Age of German romanticism was the key time point for discovering of India for the intellectual audience of the Western Europe. In many ways, the work of thinkers of this epoch can even be considered as a kind of popularization of the basic ideas of Indian wisdom among Europeans, which did not have a lot of knowledge about that. In this case, it does not mean that they have written any encyclopedic works containing previously unknown or extremely little known facts. Some information about India, Indian culture and religion began to reach Western European countries since the creation of the first Catholic missions in the 16th century. At the 18th — 19th centuries a quite extensive spectrum of various types of facts and knowledge has been already accumulated by Christian missionaries, soldiers as well as by ordinary travelers. There were also translations of some texts fundamental for the Indian philosophical tradition, such as Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita [1]. All this together led to the fact that at the beginning of the 19th century interest among European thinkers to Asian countries has increased so much that we can characterize this time as Oriental Renaissance [2], [3]. A prominent role in the formation of this phenomenon belonged to the German writer and poet Fr. Schlegel (1772-1829), who wrote in 1808 in his work *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*: “The study of Indian literature requires to be embraced by such students and patrons as in the fifteenth and sixteenth

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centuries suddenly kindled in Italy and Germany an ardent appreciation of the beauty of classical learning, and in so short a time invested it with such prevailing importance, that the form of all wisdom and science, and almost of the world itself, was changed and renovated by the influence of that re-awakened knowledge. I venture to predict that the Indian study, if embraced with equal energy, will prove no less grand and universal in its operation, and have no less influence on the sphere of European intelligence" [4].

Thus, Schlegel, therefore, can be considered the progenitor of the comparative comparison of the culture and language of Ancient India with the European one and drawing parallels of these studies of Indian heritage with the process of re-discovering of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, which took place in Europe at the Age of Renaissance. The Antiquity, once reopened, became the impetus for the further development of Europe, breathed a new life into it. The same thing, according to Schlegel, can occur with the studying of Indian culture. And it is because of the fact that India is the progenitor of European culture in general, including all European languages. Thus, an appeal to the Indian heritage is in fact a return of Europe to its own roots, a step backward, in making which Europe can emerge from the spiritual crisis in which it was not only according to Schlegel, but also according to many other thinkers of that time. The study of India from the very beginning was significant for Schlegel, but not by itself. Through this comparison of Indian and European cultures Schlegel tried to find alternatives for the further development of Europe, way out from European spiritual crisis. In Schlegel thought Europe recognized itself in India, but also distinguished itself from Indian culture and through this has been forming its cultural identity [5].

III. SCHLEGEL ABOUT EUROPE AND THE CRISIS OF EUROPEAN SPIRITUALITY

The study of India from the very beginning was significant for Schlegel, but not by itself. Through this comparison of Indian and European cultures Schlegel tried to find alternatives for the further development of Europe, way out from European spiritual crisis. In Schlegel thought Europe recognized itself in India, but also distinguished itself from Indian culture and through this has been forming its cultural identity [6]. Today we are used to perceive Europe as a kind of whole and talk about European culture as a kind of integrity. We perceive European identity as a supranational unity and easily distract from the particulars of national cultures, suggesting that despite all the diversity of Europeans, they all have some kind of common spiritual foundation. This view of things seems to us today to be taken for granted. However, upon closer inspection, it turns out that he is quite young. Both the idea of Europe as a kind of cultural unity, and the idea of a common spiritual basis for Europeans and the attendant idealization of medieval Europe, which seems almost a golden age, dates back to the Age of German romanticism. The idea of a crisis of European spirituality (at the first extent Christian) and the possibility of overcoming it by turning to Eastern (and specifically Indian) wisdom go back to the same time.

Not the last role in the formation of this understanding of Europe played F. Schlegel. In his work *Journey to France* this German thinker essentially laid down the understanding of Europe precisely as a cultural region that has its common characteristic features and historical past common to all European countries and anyway going back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. However, how exactly all the European countries go back to the culture of antiquity was decided ambiguously. In this case, Schlegel was inclined to distinguish between the southern and northern European countries, believing the culture of the northern countries (and above all Germany) to be richer and more complex, but ceasing its original distinctive development under the yoke of too much influence of the south. This influence was expressed in the dominance of Latin, which caused serious damage to German scholarship and German poetry, which preserved the memory of the ancient mythology of the Germanic peoples. This process Schlegel estimated negatively. And above all, because he posed the original German culture closer to the Indian culture, although he also considered the culture of the Ancient Greece and Rome to be derived from it too.

The position of the primacy of Indian culture, both philosophical and linguistic, can be considered as one of the fundamental for the views of Schlegel. It passes through all the work of this thinker. However, in the evaluation of Indian culture itself, we can note fundamental differences in the early and late period of his work. Until 1801-1802 we can note in Schlegel the extremely positive and even enthusiastic appreciation of Indian spirituality, in which he saw possible inspiration for the spiritual renewal and revival of Europe. Asia, and above all India, is perceived at that time as preserving spiritual unity and spiritual integrity, while Europe is considered as fragmentary, subjected to division of all possible kind, what means not only territorial, but also cultural and spiritual division. Later, in 1802-1808, Schlegel underwent conversion to Catholicism. His views have been becoming more conservative. In relation to the evaluation of Indian culture, it also became more critical. The search for possible spiritual inspiration for Europe is no longer a question. On the contrary, Indian culture is only another way of degradation, a departure from the original knowledge given by God in revelation. This approach led to a fundamental change in the approach to the study of Indian mythology too. Now Schlegel sees in it not so much the possibility of creating a new, more mystical mythology, necessary for Europe, as it was before, but rather tries to discover the reflection of the basic truths of Christianity in it.

IV. SCHLEGEL AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

In such philosophical context linguistic studies of Schlegel were formed and developed, the interest in which remained unchanged, as well as the interest in India. The analysis of languages was so important for Schlegel, since he saw the basis for his philosophical constructions in the results obtained in this way. At the same time, it is worth noting that his interest in Sanskrit itself also bears the stamp of the influence of his views and assessments not only and not so much of the culture of India as of its relationship with

the European culture. On the one hand, it was this factor that from the very beginning determined the comparative nature of his research. On the other hand, it was precisely this that involuntarily introduced Eurocentrism into Schlegel's work, since, in spite of everything his main interest was European identity and European spirituality.

An important concept for Schlegel was linguistic affinity, which he marks between Sanskrit and a number of other languages, first of all, Ancient Greek and Latin, as well as German and Persian. Affinity is reflected, in his opinion, not only in the set of similar roots, but also in the grammatical and inner structure of languages [7]. However, it is Sanskrit that is filled with the greatest wealth and at the same time harmony. That leads Schlegel to the conclusion that it is Sanskrit that is the most ancient of all the analyzed languages [8]. The remaining languages are derived from it and develop in the direction of simplifying linguistic structures.

However, not all languages are marked by an equal degree of similarity with Sanskrit. So, it is much smaller in languages like Jewish or Arabic. Schlegel considers these languages as belonging to another group and does not consider them as directly derived from Sanskrit. But also in them he sees some numbers of words with the same root as Sanskrit. That fact was explained by Schlegel by simple borrowing and mixing elements of different languages [9].

Thus, Schlegel identifies two large groups of languages [10]. The first is organic languages (or inflectional). They are characterized by a wealth of grammatical and morphological forms. New forms are formed by attaching suffixes and prefixes to the root, so we are dealing with the constant modifications of the words themselves. These languages are distinguished by richness, strength and durability [11]. Latin, Ancient Greek, Persian, German and Sanskrit, as the most ancient of all, belong to this group. The second group is mechanical (or affixal). The grammatical indicators here are special particles that are attached to the original words purely mechanically. These languages are distinguished by a smaller variety of forms. To this group belong Hebrew, Arabic, and some other languages, for example, the languages of the peoples of America.

Speaking about Schlegel's linguistic studies and emphasizing its importance for the formation of comparative linguistics, one should nevertheless mention that he was not an absolute pioneer in this field. Noting the similarity of Sanskrit and European languages, he essentially introduces the concept of "Indo-European language group", which he calls "Indo-Germanic" one. And we can see here his merit. However, the very concept of linguistic affinity begins to form and be studied long before the beginning of the 19th century, and namely since the Renaissance. Perhaps the first who talked about the affinity of Sanskrit and European languages was Philip Sassetti. This Italian traveler wrote his Letters from India at the end of the 16th century and did not only express the idea of similarity between Sanskrit and Italian but also gave some examples of this [12]. In 1786, this idea was reasonably repeated by William Jones, whose works were known to Schlegel and to which he referred. And in 1798 was published another work devoted to this subject,

and namely the work of the Austrian researcher Paulinus of St. Bartholomew. At the same time, it was Schlegel who, for the first time, clearly formulated the classification of languages into two groups — inflectional and affixal — and it was he, more than any of the above-mentioned thinkers, who promoted knowledge of both India as a whole and its ancient language.

V. CONCLUSION

We have analyzed what Schlegel thought about the spiritual situation in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. He as well as other thinkers of Oriental Renaissance claimed that Europe went through deep crises and tried to find the way out from this. India and its great and ancient culture gave him the hope that this way out can be found. In India he saw the roots of European spirituality, its religion, culture and languages. He claimed that Sanskrit was the mother of all European languages as well as roots of European spirituality was ground in Indian philosophical thought. In analyzing of similarity between Sanskrit and European languages he created in fact the concept of linguistic affinity. Herewith he was a grounder of comparative linguistics studies.

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