The Nay Science: A History of German Indology
Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee

ABSTRACT
This book offers a new perspective on the problem of scientific method in the human sciences. Taking German Indological scholarship on the Mahabharata and the Bhagavadgita as its example, the book develops a critique of the modern valorization of method over truth in the humanities. The book shows how, from its origins in eighteenth-century Neo-Protestantism onwards, the critical method was used as a way of making theological claims against rival philosophical and/or religious traditions. Via discussions of German Romanticism, the pantheism controversy, scientific positivism, and empiricism, it shows how theological concerns dominated German scholarship on the Indian texts. Indology functions as a test case for wider concerns: the rise of historicism, the displacement of philosophical concerns from thinking, and the belief in the ability of a technical method to produce truth. Based on the historical evidence of the first part of the book, a case is then made in the second part for going beyond both the critical pretensions of modern academic scholarship and the objections of its post-structuralist or post-Orientalist critics. By contrasting German Indology with Plato’s concern for virtue and Gandhi’s focus on praxis, the book argues for a conception of the humanities as a dialogue between the ancients and moderns and between eastern and western cultures.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Bhagavadgita, Neo-Protestantism, German Romanticism, pantheism controversy, scientific positivism, empiricism, virtue, praxis

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AUTHORS
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Introduction

Vishwa Adluri
Joydeep Bagchee

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This introductory chapter first sets out the book’s purpose, which is to investigate German scholarship on India between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against the backdrop of its methodological self-understanding. It pursues this inquiry out of a wider interest in German philosophy of the same period, especially as concerns debates over scientific method. The chapter then discusses the history of German Indology as a history of method and the origins of the historical-critical method in the neo-Protestantism of the eighteenth century, followed by a description of the book’s scope and organization.

Keywords: German scholarship, India, self-understanding, German philosophy, scientific method, German Indology, neo-Protestantism

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This chapter examines some early interpretations of the Mahābhārata, including Christian Lassen’s “Beiträge zur Kunde des Indischen Altertum aus dem Mahābhārata,” Adolf Holtzmann Sr.’s Indische Sagen, and Adolf Holtzmann Jr.’s Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata and Die neunzehn Bücher des Mahābhārata. It shows how concepts such as internal criticism (innere Kritik), tendency criticism (Tendenzkritik), and text history and redaction history (Textgeschichte and Redaktionsgeschichte) that originally developed in the context of biblical criticism were projected onto the Indian epic. Even though the original field of application of these concepts was Old Testament criticism, they were found useful in epic studies to separate out an “Urepos” (a primordial epic or an original epic) from the text as extant, a process that led to the postulation of two phases (stages or ideologies) in Indian history: an Aryan-Indo-Germanic phase and a Brahmanic-Hindu phase. These concepts had roughly the same heuristic value as the distinction between Petrine and Pauline factions in primal Christianity had for biblical criticism.

**Keywords:** German scholarship, Mahābhārata, Christian Lassen, Adolf Holtzmann Sr, Adolf Holtzmann Jr, biblical criticism, Indian history
This chapter discusses the development of a spurious branch of science dedicated to explaining how the Mahābhārata, whose hypothetical origins were among Kṣatriya warriors, could have evolved into the work of Brahmanic lore possessed today. It undertakes a detailed reconstruction of the most important German Mahābhārata interpretation of the day: Adolf Holtzmann Jr.’s Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata from 1892. The first twelve sections of the chapter focus on Holtzmann’s Mahābhārata. Section 13 then turns to Oldenberg’s Mahābhārata, showing how, by the early twentieth century, Holtzmann’s prejudices regarding the epic had become established dogma.

**Keywords:** Adolf Holtzmann Jr, Brahmanic lore, German Mahābhārata, Oldenberg

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Chapters 1 and 2 focused on German Mahābhārata studies, especially as these played a role in the induction of historical criticism into the methodological canon of the Indologists. This chapter looks at how, following its canonization in the work of Lassen, Holtzmann, and others, this method was transferred to the study of the Gitā and led, by the twentieth century, to a completely different picture of the text than the one held by an earlier generation of scholars. The chapter is organized into eighteen sections. Following a preliminary section on the conditions that enabled the reemergence of the Bhagavadgitā in Germany, it takes a closer look at the Indological Gitā. It focuses on six Indological Gitās: the “pantheistic Gitā” of Adolf Holtzmann Jr., the “theistic Gitā” of Richard Garbe, the “epic Gitā” of Hermann Jacobi, the “Kṛṣṇa Gitā” of Hermann Oldenberg, the “trinitarian Gitā” of Rudolf Otto, and the “Āryan Gitā” of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer. The chapter argues that the German Gitā is constituted less by its content (which can vary enormously) than by certain presuppositions regarding the nature and function of scholarship.

**Keywords:** German Gitā, Adolf Holtzmann Jr, Richard Garbe, Hermann Jacobi, Hermann Oldenberg, Rudolf Otto, Jakob Wilhelm Hauer

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The examination of the critical method as applied in German Mahābhārata and Bhagavadgītā scholarship has shown that although German scholars claimed to take a scientific approach to the epic, their interpretations were at best tangential and at worst irrelevant to the text at hand. No German interpreter in a period extending one hundred years had succeeded in presenting a coherent, philosophically illuminating interpretation of the Mahābhārata. The histories they presented of the epic existed nowhere else outside their own minds. The problem in German interpretations of Indian texts is not simply one of the inevitable misinterpretations that beset every hermeneutic endeavor. Rather, the critical method itself entailed a number of problematic prejudices. This chapter seeks to understand the reasons why the Indologists themselves could not see these problems. It looks at the scientization of Protestant theology in the critical method; the secularization of Protestant theology in the study of the history of religions; and the institutionalization of Protestant theology in Indology. It examines how the historical-critical method participates in a tradition of projecting a universal history, most characteristic of Christianity; how the method makes use of a teleological narrative of history, where history moves from a state of immaturity (the Kantian Unmündigkeit) to an enlightened, free, and critical use of reason; and how this narrative was used to justify implantation of an alternative tradition of textual scholarship in place of the Indian commentarial tradition.

Keywords:  German Mahābhārata, Bhagavadgītā, German scholarship, German Indology, Protestant theology, historical-critical method
This chapter examines some of the strategies used by Indologists to make the case for their discipline as Wissenschaft and how those strategies relate to understandings of science, both historical and contemporary. The chapter is organized into eight sections. The first two sections take a look at how, in the work of Hermann Oldenberg—the leading theoretician of Indology of the day—a new ideal of scientific scholarship on India emerged, and at how this ideal was then grounded in a positivist philology. The next three sections present a brief overview of three scientific currents of the time—positivism, historicism, and empiricism—and show how Indologists were responding to broader movements in philosophy of science, especially the work of Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the intellectual father of positivism and historicism. The sixth section looks at criticisms that the positivistic notion of truth has been subject to in the twentieth century. The seventh section returns the discussion to Kant’s critical project and its historical influence. The eighth and concluding section presents an overview of Gadamer’s criticisms of the attempt to construe the scientific character of the human sciences along the lines of the natural sciences.

Keywords: German Indology, Indologists, Hermann Oldenberg, India, scientific scholarship, positivist philology, positivism, historicism, empiricism, Auguste Comte

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Conclusion: Gandhi on the Gitā

Vishwa Adluri
Joydeep Bagchee

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This chapter summarizes the preceding discussions and discusses some lessons that can be drawn from the diremption of German Indology for the humanities. It argues that German Indologists placed their faith in a narrow concept of scientific method, which they thought would automatically endow them with the ability to make sense of the text. But the task of interpretation is much more complex, requiring qualities such as patience, sympathy, maturity, and intellectual and personal humility. A generation of Indologists from Holtzmann to Malinar undertook their dissections of the text, knowing neither what the text said nor what it actually took to interpret it. Gandhi’s reading of the Bhagavadgitā is used to show how it is possible to negotiate the various demands of reading a text meaningfully, of taking into consideration its reception, and of making it hermeneutically productive for one’s present.

Keywords: German Indology, Indologists, scientific method, Gandhi, interpretation, Bhagavadgitā
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