The Vedas form one of the oldest elaborate corpuses of texts in an Indo-European language, connected to a ritual system still in use. In 2003, UNESCO declared the tradition of the Vedic chant, alive in present-day India, a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

**Publications**

There has been no lack of interest in Vedic studies over the last twenty years, nor lack of publications catering to that interest. In view of the divergent uses of the terms ‘Vedas’ and ‘Vedic’, it is useful to point out that certain connotations are not intended in Texts, Language and Ritual. While the term Veda literally means ‘knowledge’, here it primarily refers to a group of orally transmitted texts that became canonical in the first millennium B.C.E. on the Indian subcontinent. The ‘knowledge’ is concerned with an intricate ritual system that is regarded to have definite implications for man and the cosmos. These canonical texts became embedded in a tradition that regards these as having indisputable authority. Justification for this authority is usually derived from either, for logicians, the divine nature of the author(s); or, for Vedic exegetes, from the absence of any author; human or divine. Traditional texts directly dealing with the canonical core texts, for philology is perhaps the only discipline in which the West and India are close to accepting overlapping basic principles.

The localization debate

A fourth development consists of advances in identifying when and where to the people to whom we owe the Vedas lived. The contributions by Michael Witzel, Harry Falk and Wilhelm Rau in the proceedings of the First International Vedic Workshop (Witzel 1997) are a good introduction to the subject. The debate on the localization and the possible displacements of the Vedic people dates back to the early days of Indology and is of continuing interest to both scholars and a wider audience.

Developments from outside Indology have changed the terms of the debate: the work of modern geneticists may shed light on the waves of immigration into the Indian subcontinent. Geneticists suggest these started from the south, via the ocean, and later came from the north. Because the Vedas constitute such an old and elaborate corpus of texts, in a language that is ‘Indo-European’ but which has important remains of substratum or adstratum languages, the scientific relevance for investigation into the contacts between various waves of early African emigrants meeting on the Indian subcontinent can be expected to increase.

Recently another breakthrough occurred in a different area, in which time may have an impact on Indology and Vedic studies. In 2003, for the first time, India became a creditor to the International Monetary Fund. Indian economic growth will hopefully also bring new government policies to stimulate solid scholarship in the field of Vedic and other Indological studies.

**strengths and limitations, are basic to the work of Bharati Krishna Tirtha, the philological method underlies the studies presented in Texts, Language and Ritual. Philology may be described as the art of ‘listening’ to a text; Witzel defined it as ‘the study of a civilization based on its texts’ (1997:7). Philology has a solid background in the Western tradition of textual scholarship, and also in a more dispersed way in India (Katre 1954; Colas 2001). It is perhaps the only discipline in which the West and India are close to accepting overlapping basic principles - an important topic for future comparative research.

The researchers in this book agree on the importance of the philological method, where possible supplemented by ‘Vedic fieldwork’ - the study of Vedic rituals in South Asia who continue the ritual tradition into which they were born. In addition, the study of the linguistic and ritual aspects of the Vedas required by different disciplinary approaches ranging from linguistics to the social sciences.

In a recent overview of research on the oldest of the four Vedas, The *Rgveda*, Oberlies (1998, 1999 and 2001) raised crucial issues in religious and Sanskrit studies. The authors’ work has given rise to a long discussion on the theories and methods underlying Vedic research. Even if the value of Oberlies’ approach is undeniable, Vedic studies should be explored by different disciplines, which should cooperate without being conflated.

The combination of different disciplines (by scholars who are well-versed at least in one field) is an important tool in overcoming a limitation of the philological method. This limitation has led to criticism of its status as a scientific discipline: reliance on the personal judgment of a critical mind, though formed over a long process of training and research, makes subjectivity inevitable. This problem exists for anyone who tries to reconstruct a past reality on the basis of limited available textual or other remains. In the words of Cavalli-Sforza (2000: VIII): ‘To some, history (including evolution) is not a science, because its results cannot be replicated and thus cannot be tested by the experimental method. But studying the same phenomenon from different angles, from many disciplines, each of which supplies independent facts, has the value of largely independent repetition. This makes the multidisciplinary approach indispensable.’

**References**


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**Research**

Vedic Studies: Texts, Language and Ritual

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