What we Indologists owe to anthropologists

Axel Michaels
What we Indologists owe to anthropologists

Axel Michaels

1 The following text is a reaction and an objection to Gérard Toffin’s contribution titled ‘Merging perspectives on classical Hinduism and popular Hindu religion’, which was published in the previous issue of EBHR (No 57) as a foreword to the translation of ‘Festivals, time and space: the structure of the Indo-Nepalese version of the Hindu calendar’ by Marc Gaborieau. Toffin references my article ‘At the point of confluence of Sociology and Indology’ – Louis Dumont’s postulate reconsidered (Michaels 2020), notably where I take up the topic of the context and conditions of cooperation between these two disciplinary approaches. The point of departure of my analysis was Louis Dumont’s and David Pocock’s programmatic introduction that inaugurated the first issue of Contributions to Indian Sociology in 1957, where they declared cooperation between sociology (to be understood as social anthropology) and Indology as a prerequisite for understanding Indian (or Hindu) society:

In our opinion, the first condition for a sound development of Sociology of India is found in the establishment of the proper relation between it and classical Indology. We wish to show how on one side the construction of an Indian Sociology rests in part upon the existence of Indology and how, on the other hand, far from its results being confined to its own domain, it can hope in its turn to widen and deepen the understanding of India, present and past, to which Indology is devoted.

It should be obvious, in principle, that a Sociology of India lies at the point of confluence of Sociology and Indology. (Dumont and Pocock 1957: 9)

2 Back in 2020 when I wrote my article, on which the following is broadly and partly literally based, I first elaborated on the historical background of the denigration of anthropological approaches to South Asia against the rise of an idealising Indology as a philological discipline (see also Michaels 2016: 14–18). At the end of the 19th century, there were almost no points of contact between the two disciplines because anthropology did not yet exist and Indology preferred timeless religious and philosophical ideas to the practice of religion. The result was that, all in all, anthropology and Indology kept to their own respective disciplinary lines. Then I discussed the structural, methodological and ideological problems that made it difficult
to follow Dumont’s and Pocock’s advice. I concluded that the anthropology of South Asia and Indology never fully exploited the potential of such a cooperation.

3 The question therefore remained: what could be a more substantial way of confluence? With regard to Indology, I referred to what I call ‘Ethno-Indology’ as a reconsideration of traditional disciplinary methods (see Michaels 2004a and 2005). By this I mean the anthropology of texts, that is, an analysis of the context and locality of the texts, of its agents (Brahmins, mendicants, storytellers, scholars, pandits), patrons, users, readers etc, of the social structures that generate texts, of the application of texts, for instance in rituals, or of the performance and reception of texts. Such an extended notion of ‘text’ would include oral literature, grey literature, Internet sources of various religious communities, texts communicated by mass media such as journals, comics, television and video recordings etc; visual sources such as paintings, posters, photographs or films, material objects of cultural practice, maps and many others. From anthropology, Indology could also learn how texts have been produced by particular interests and conflicts, how texts are shared and distributed by practice, by ignorance, also by Brahmins who perhaps know the text by heart: this dealing with texts always requires an adaptation or a re-contextualisation of texts. This would direct the focus away from the high-culture approach to the cultural, social, political, gender and subaltern perspectives and the importance of everyday life. It would stress the importance of regional studies, fieldwork and vernacular languages. Texts are certainly not only a written passive repository of information but serve to generate power, to circulate or monopolise influence, honour or prestige.

4 I have followed this ethno-Indological approach in several publications, especially alongside Niels Gutschow, on life-cycle rituals of the Newars (Gutschow and Michaels 2005, 2008 and 2012). The books include detailed documentation and films by Christian Bau about the rituals, as well as editions and translations of a number of Nevārī manuals for the performances. I was more than surprised when Gérard Toffin stated the following:

This combined approach of ethnography and Indian Sanskrit heritage […], has recently been the subject of criticism. The most vehement, but also the most unfair, is that of Axel Michaels. In an article published in Contributions to Indian Sociology in 2020, this researcher, a philologist specialised in Nepal but also an ethnographer of Nepalese temples, takes issue with the alliance between anthropology and Orientalism defended by L. Dumont (Michaels 2020).

5 Below, I further clarify the terms of the debate and the nature of my critique of Dumont, but let me point out that in my article Dumont is not quoted by me ‘only to be criticised’ as Toffin wrongly claims, but because of his much cited and discussed phrase on the confluence of sociology and Indology – the topic of my article. Also, contrary to Toffin’s comment that my analysis ‘includes no reference to French anthropologists’, my article does mention several French scholars, such as Madeleine Biardeau, Célestine Bouglé, Jean Antoine Dubois, George Dumézil, Jean Filliozat, Henri Hubert, Sylvain Lévi, Marcel Mauss, Louis Renou, Paul Mus and Roland Lardinois, though I did not mention them just because they are French. Anyhow, Toffin continues:

Michaels rightly points out that India is ‘not one’, as L. Dumont claims, but very diverse. Yet he curiously restricts Indology to the reading and editing of ancient texts, without considering that it also concerns the whole Indian discourse, both religious and non-religious, of the so-called classical period. Carried away by his criticism, Michaels finally gives a particularly narrow view of his discipline, forgetting the major texts written by his colleagues – Renou, Biardeau, Malamoud,
Vaudeville (the latter for more recent religious texts) to mention only a few French names – on the canonical Indian tradition. Under the pretext that Brahmins are not as important as they are said to be and that they are not always placed at the top of the hierarchy, Michaels finally refutes a method that he himself used in his ethnographic book on the temple of Pasupatinath (2008). Customs and practices are nevertheless embedded in the symbolic and the symbolic is embedded in practices. (Toffin 2021, § 6)

Let me just respond with the following: nowhere do I 'restrict Indology to reading and editing ancient texts', nor have I overlooked major texts written by my colleagues on the canonical Indian (I would prefer to say 'Brahmanical') tradition. How could I? I have myself used, edited and translated quite a number of such texts and more importantly, in stark contradiction to what Toffin insinuates, I argue in Contributions to Indian Sociology for a real, not just nominal confluence of both a philological and an anthropological approach to South Asia. As I call this method Ethno-Indology, I did not 'refute' this 'combined approach' but, indeed on the contrary and as proven above, I have theoretically and practically followed it for a long while – in my work and publications and in editing the book series Ethno-indology and with great admiration for many scholars in France and elsewhere who are on a similar track.

Moreover, Indologists could learn from anthropologists to look further for hidden or in-between meanings. The Indologist Sylvain Lévi, for example, did pioneering work on Nepal by considering the anthropological aspects of texts to such an extent that the anthropologist András Höfer wrote an article on him with the significant subtitle: 'What we Social Scientists owe to Sylvain Levi' in which he argues that Lévi is generally considered as an indologist. In reality, he saw himself as an historian. Although a philologist by training and acquainted with an amazing number of languages (cf. Renou 1936: 57), the documents of the past were, for him, not ends in themselves, but sources of information to be decoded with the suspicion of the historian. As Renou (1936: 8–9) aptly states, Lévi developed a particular sensitivity for meanings hidden 'beneath the words' (un sens profond des réalités [sic] sous les mots). In fact, Lévi extended his quest for meaning into the realms of what we now call ideology, ethnotheory and contextual analysis. [...] he kept a close watch on the social functions of his sources. What fascinated him was the intricate relationship between the author and the public, rather than the mere literary value of a source, the process which produced a source, rather than the product, the source itself. (Höfer 1979: 176)

My own transcultural approach (cf Michaels 2019) is more far-reaching. It attacks the still existing dominance of the scientific power of the ‘West’ through reflexivity and in cooperation with ‘other’ members of the cultures. It also challenges the design and scope of disciplines, which then become such transcultural entanglements, open to the streams of social contexts and historical processes as well as to hermeneutical ambiguities and ambivalences in texts. This approach opens ways of studying processes of relation and connectivity rather than static forms and manifestations of cultures, eg texts, and historically or locally specific traditions of appropriation, eg fieldwork. To overcome the aporia that one encounters in defining ‘culture’ or cultural elements which, transculturally seen, one has to deny, it is necessary to use a methodological transculturality as a default mode or heuristic concept, ie by looking at the formative and transformative processes resulting in any given cultural manifestation. We discover such cultural entanglements through, for example, the study of processes of negotiation, bargaining and competition which also allow conclusions on monopoles of
interpretation and power relations – thus helping to avoid the danger of essentialism that always lurks around every corner.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. See also, on my critique of Dumont, Michaels 2004: 188–294.
AUTHOR

AXEL MICHAELS

Axel Michaels is senior professor of Classical Indology, South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University and, since 2014, he is head of the research unit 'Documents on the History of Religion and Law or pre-modern Nepal'. Among his recent publications are Homo Ritualis: Hindu rituals and its significance for ritual theory (Oxford University Press, 2016) and Kultur und Geschichte Nepals (Kroener 2018, engl. Cultural History of Nepal, forthcoming with Oxford University Press, 2022).