

The Birth of Indianism: The Discovery of the “Indou” Pagodas in the XVIIIth Century

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When Anquetil-Duperron landed at Pondicherry in 1755, in search of the sacred books of the “Indous et des Parsees” (“Hindus and Parsees”), he surely had no idea that he was inaugurating a new discipline, Indianism. He returned to France in 1761, laden with a whole library of Indian texts which he was to spend the rest of his life deciphering. That year was a turning point in Indian history: the Marathes, on the verge of becoming the dominant power of the entire Indian continent, were crushed in Panipat, north of Delhi, by the armies of an Afghan invasion, and this catastrophe halted their advance for a while. During the same year, in the south of India, Lally-Tollendal was beaten and taken prisoner by the English, thereby destroying the French dream, shared by Dupleix and Bussy, of creating an Indian empire for themselves.

The political elimination of the French provoked a radical change in perspective among the Frenchmen who remained in India and those who later joined them. Offering their services to the rajahs or nabobs to help in resisting the English, they no longer acted as conquerors, but rather as friends. They were almost compelled to mix with the local populations and to understand more fully their customs and beliefs. Thus, 1761 marked the beginning of the first age of French Indianism.

This first age is characterized by direct observation. Concerning the mythology of the “Indous,” for example, it was by mixing with the crowds of pilgrims in certain great sacred places, and by absorbing the oral tradition transmitted there, that the French were able to acquire the rudiments of a knowledge that was very new to Europe, so new that it was often necessary for them to invent words to des-

ignate things and phenomena which did not exist in their own culture. Thus, in differentiating Indians from American Indians, they were the first to use the term "Indus," to which the nineteenth century would add an "H." To distinguish the temples from other religious buildings they borrowed the word "pagoda" from the Portuguese. It seems to have been more difficult to distinguish Hindu mythology from other beliefs: Pierre Sonnerat and Le Gentil de la Galaisière suggested the term "Allegorism," which was in favor with a few French writers at the time; Foucher d'Obsonville proposed the term "Tolerantism," Polier the term "Deism." Undoubtedly the "pagodas" they visited could not furnish them with the generic term which they might then have translated or adapted to French. But their observations offer precise information concerning the oral tradition of religious India at that time, as we shall demonstrate here with a few famous examples: the temples of Jagannath-Puri in Orissa and Chidambaram in the Tamil country, and the towns of Mathura and Benares on the Ganges.

The Temple of Jagannath

From the tales told to him in Puri, Sonnerat isolates the four following points (1782, I, p. 218):

1. the site of Jagannath-Puri on the eastern coast of India is tied to the great epic of the Mahabharata and commemorates the end of the great war of the Bharata as well as the birth of a new age (the fourth) for humanity;
2. it is at Jagannath-Puri that the history of the Bharata begins and that their first king Paritchit set up the first Hindu kingdom;
3. Krishna, incarnation of the Protective God Vishnu, is the Ruler of this new age;
4. the end of the great war and the beginning of the first Hindu kingdom are dated very precisely, for Sonnerat discovered (in 1781) that the Hindus had these events take place exactly 4883 years before.

Legoux de Flaix, an engineer-technocrat who helped rebuild Pondicherry after its destruction by the English in 1761 and spent many years in India, appreciated first and foremost the immense granite base, hewn into the rock, upon which the temple of

Jagannath rests; he marvelled at the tremendous feat of its construction. Further on, he tries to understand the profound inspiration which motivated the builders of this immense building (1807, I, p. 118): “. . . erected to the all-powerful being in whom this people place all their confidence and who alone inspires all happy, benevolent and human sensations, which characterize his nature and distinguish him from his neighbors, and from all other peoples.”

Anquetil-Duperron (*Zend-Avesta*, 1771, I, p. 81) arrived at the temple of Jagannath on June 6, 1757 and left the next day after having spent the night under a “mole” (or grove) of palm trees near the temple. People were preparing the great yearly festival in which the temple chariots were taken around the city in procession. Anquetil witnessed the construction and decoration of these chariots, and would have been part of the festival had he been able to wait twelve days. But his limited funds ran out; he had to reach Pondicherry as quickly as possible or die of hunger along the way. To his great disappointment, he was not able either to enter the temple or to see the statue of Jagannath, for Brahmin officials forbade him. He had to content himself with admiring the enormous cut stones of the temple enclosure.

Fourteen years later, when publishing the work *Zend-Avesta*, which contained the story of his travels in India, Anquetil-Duperron nonetheless added the legend of the foundation of the temple in a note.

The abbé Dubois gives more or less the same account in an appendix to his work *Moeurs, Institutions et Cérémonies des Peuples de l'Inde* (1825, II, p. 536). Sonnerat, whom we have already cited, gives two versions of this legend as well. One of them is as follows (1782, I, p.p. 169-170): “Paritchitou, successor and nephew of Darma-Raja, had a dream in which he saw Vishnu, who spoke to him with these words, ‘Go to the edge of the sea, you will find my body, carry it away, seal it in a temple for six months after which you may show it to everyone, and pray to it.’

“Paritchitou, followed by a large retinue and many Brahmins, then went to the edge of the sea, where they found the body of Quichena. He bore it away with much pomp and shut it away in a temple; but urged on by an indiscreet longing, he wanted to see it at the end of three months, and found it turned into stone: immedi-

ately he made it a god to whom he offered his prayers. This same body is still adored by the Indians on the coast of Orissa in an aldea called *Chenaguanaden*, which we know by the name of Jagrenat: one of India's most sacred places. The Indians believe that they cannot be saved without having at least once in their lives made a pilgrimage there, which, every year, attracts an infinite gathering of people during the celebration of the dedication of the temple." The importance of the pilgrimage to Jagannath for the Indians is confirmed by Charpentier de Cossigny (1799, II, p.p. 14-15).

One aspect of the ritual of the temple of Jagannath was to become a veritable cliché in the minds of the Europeans in the nineteenth century: the horrible spectacle of the devout having themselves crushed and pounded by the chariots during the annual procession. Dubois denounces this excess of fanaticism in very negative terms. *La Flotte* (1769, p. 218) and Grandpré also mention it. The latter says the following (1801, I, p.p. 155-156): "Once all the chariot festivals were marked by the death of someone who believed he earned the heavens by having himself crushed or mutilated by the wheels. [. . .] No longer does one see people who wish to pay so dearly for their future happiness; and with the exception of the pagoda at Jagrenat, the most famous in all of India, where at most one devout person a year dies in this way, one no longer sees people throw themselves before the chariots, or if someone does throw himself, he has the skill to dodge the encounter with the fatal wheel and emerge safe and sound, or with no more than a slight injury."

The devotional suicide of the "fanatics" at Jagannath was, like the sacrifice of widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands, one of the Hindu curiosities which any traveler had to decry to have any credibility. Those French travelers at the end of the eighteenth century who actually witnessed, at Jagannath or elsewhere, a procession of chariots, realized however that such deaths were rare; nevertheless, they persisted in attributing them to Hindu fanaticism rather than to accidents due to the crowds.

The Legend of the Temple of Chidambaram

The temple of Chidambaram, which certain travelers also wrote as Chalebrom, was very near to Pondicherry. Impressed by its great age, which he nonetheless considered inferior to Jagannath, Legoux de Flaix drew a diagram and sketched its outline. The con-

struction of the two temples, in reality, dates back to the twelfth century. Three elements of the magnificent ensemble of Chidambaram caught Legoux de Flaix's attention: the great pool, the salon with a thousand columns, and above all the sanctuary itself, for which Legoux gives the Tamil name of "koël" (or "kovil")(1807, I, p.p. 122-123):

"This nave is totally bare, with no ornament whatsoever, either on the inside or on the outside facings of the walls. This contrast must seem extraordinary to those who observe the monuments of these people, and who are not instructed in their religious ideas, which prevent their koël, properly speaking, from being decorated with any image other than representations of the divinity, whereas all the other parts are filled with figures, emblems and all sorts of decorations used in the architecture of this country. The ornaments which overwhelm all sides of their buildings to the point of dazzling the view and even tiring it disagreeably if looked at too long, are no longer seen in the sacred site of the temples. Am I permitted at present to ask how some people, when speaking of the religion of Brouma, allow themselves to call it idolatry, a cult of material objects . . . "

Thus the stripping of the sanctuary of the temple of Chidambaram causes Legoux le Flair to reflect sadly on the nature of the Hindu religion. But he cannot contain his great admiration before an immense stone chain suspended in the main hall of the sanctuary (1807, I, p.p. 125-126): "This chain, of exquisite workmanship, emerges from four points of the temple vault, and as it falls, forms four equidistant garlands, whose ends are secured by as many arched stones attached to the same vault. Each garland is the length of thirty-seven King's feet; and each link three feet and one inch, with a diameter of two inches and five lines; they are finely worked and so polished that rays of light reflect as if on a mirror. One can well judge the difficulty of this work, especially in the transport of such a great mass; for aside from the weight of the four parts of this chain, one must take into account the four enormous stones which support it, and which were cut in the same quarry located more than twenty leagues from the pagoda I'm describing."

In the eyes of the astronomer Le Gentil de la Galaisière, in 1768-1769, this enormous chain hewn in stone bears witness to the patience of Indian artisans (1780, I, p.p. 172-173). For the Intendant Poivre, who moved to the Ile de France after a short stay in India in 1769, the works of sculpture decorating the inside and the outside of this well-known temple of the coast of Coromandel "represent the infamous stories of the Indians" (Title, 1986, p. 110).

His judgment bears witness to the reserve with which the old seminarist regarded the religion and the myths of India. But for Sonnerat the temple of Chidambaram is one "of the most famous of the coast of Coromandel for the followers of Chiven" and he indicates that this temple dates from the flowering of Antiquity (1782, I, p. 217).

Having gathered together many legends from the mouths of numerous priests to whom he was bound in friendship, Jacques Maissin set himself the task of transcribing them. To him, indeed, ". . . the Hindus and brahmins of the sects of Brouma, Vishnu, Roudra and Chiva recognize each of them [respectively] as a supreme being" (1975, p. 223). He gives us the etymology of Chidambaram as well as the legend of its mythic origin (Maissin, 1975, p. 256): "*Chit* means wisdom, and *ambaram* means air. By putting these names together the Nobles indicate a sage who resides in the air, and if one adds the word *tirou*, it then means the place where one worships divine wisdom."

Maissin was not far from the truth. At Chidambaram, in fact, Shiva is worshipped under the sign (or *linga*) of the impalpable, conceived as air. The sanctuary is thus divided into two parts, one of which is empty, for Shiva resides there in the form of empty space and thought. The other side is a dance hall where he presides as Nararaja, the king of dance. It is in this place where he performed his cosmic dance or *tandava* in an attempt to surpass the dance of the goddess Kali before these two divinities were united in marriage. Maissin gives a detailed version of this legend in his work *Recherche de la Vérité sur l'état civil, politique et religieux des Hindous* (1975, p.p. 255-256): "Siva appeared to two gurus Gansor Magarichi and Padangelu who were doing penance in the desert of Tilleyvanam and asked what they wanted: they answered that the goddess Cali bothered them in the duties of their ministry and that they were doing penance and calling for his help in order to be delivered from her persecutions. Siva presented the two gurus to Vishnu, and told him of Cali's persecutions. Vishnu and Siva resolved to call together an assembly of the gods over which the former would preside.

"When the gods were assembled, they called for Cali, praising her agility and grace in dance; but then they said that Siva believed himself more skilled than she in this art, and that if she could do better than

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this god they would have him bound, but that if Siva got the better of her, she would have the same punishment.

“Jealousy overwhelmed Cali’s thoughts: she proposed a challenge; Siva accepted. They began to dance and continued for three days without interruption. Meanwhile Siva was the first to begin to tire, and he was about to be beaten by Cali when Vishnu, who noticed his predicament, signalled to him by raising his left foot and his eyes heavenwards. Siva understood the hint and, lifting up one foot and dancing on the other, he revealed what modesty demands to be covered.

“Cali, ashamed to see Siva’s nudity, bowed her head; this set her off balance; she looked at the gods angrily and said: Is this how you trick me? Allow me to put on drawers, so that I can dance like Siva. We shall begin again, so you shall see which of us will win.

“The gods, who had agreed to trick Cali, said to her: You have lost once, that is enough for us. The despairing goddess wiped the sweat from her brow, from which emerged a great giant who wanted to destroy all the gods. In answer to their prayers Siva crushed it with his foot, after which they bound Cali. At the height of their joy in seeing her vanquished, the gods cast a rain of flowers down below and sounded the great kettledrums; afterwards the daughters of heaven performed the ceremony called *Allatty* for Siva, to remove his “eyed cap” (“*la toque oeillade*”) and introduce him to the assembly of the gods.

“Siva then told the two gurus who had accused Cali: Fear no more, you are delivered from the persecutions of your enemy: may you and your families prosper; offer sacrifices to me as usual; take the name of Tilley Mouvayer; make statues in your likeness and offer sacrifices to them. Then he sent them away.

“Cali, who saw them leave, cried out, What! You are leaving. You did not bind me. I am vanquished by Siva, I offer him my hand if he wishes to take me as a wife. Vishnu, hearing these words, said to Siva, Cali was your wife, because she is Satty, and became Cali only through pride; she has been punished, still more humiliated by the victory you have just had over her; take her then as your wife. Siva accepted her in the presence of all the gods. She was named Tilley Machiar. She was granted the privilege of accepting the sacrifices of the gurus Tilley Mouvayer. Then the gods retired. Hence Siva’s name of Tandavam; and by this name he is worshipped at Chitambaram.”

Descriptions of Mathura

Mathura was known as the birthplace of the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna, the flute player and seducer of cowherdresses.

Tieffenthaler was impressed by the holiness of the hermits who had their huts there, of which he gives a very interesting description. Then he writes (1789, II, p.p. 205-206): "The main temple, where the greatest number of these superstitious people gather, is found on the banks of the Djemna river. It is ancient, built with red stones, and worthy of being seen for its size and its architecture. The walls are very high, and made out of bricks, similar to those of a fortress. The interior is narrow and dark. [. . .] One sees another smaller building as well, built in the shape of a pyramid and ending in a point, on the top of which peacocks make their nests like storks in Europe. [. . .] Just outside the village, on the road to Mathura, on the banks of the Djemna one finds an ancient and abandoned building erected in memory of Krishen(sic): for on this site, according to tradition, he played the flute, being a herdsman, and there he would meet Rada whom he loved so madly."

Colonel de Polier is the author of a work entitled *Mythologie des Indous*. Written after his return to Europe in 1788, the work was published posthumously in 1809 in Rudolfstadt (Switzerland) by his niece, the canoness de Polier. The author admits himself that he was (1986, p. 19) "very shocked that after such a long stay in India (during which I lived more among the country's natives than among Europeans) I knew so little, and understood so poorly, the rudiments of their primitive mythology." He remedied this by hiring an erudite Sikh named Ramtchund, who explained the entire mythological Hindu system to him (Polier, 1986, pp. 20-21): ". . . I wrote as he dictated the historical summary of the three epic poems, the *Marconday*, the *Ramein Purby*, the *Mahabharat*, and that of the avatars or the incarnations of Vishnu, the story of *Chrisnen* and all the fables and legends about the *Deiotas*, or intermediary beings, the *Bhagts*, or saints, and the famous characters in their mythology; in a word, the whole system as it was in its origin, and as it was in all its variations, and which, presented in its true perspective, is very different from the way I imagined it before I knew it in depth, and from the ideas one forms about it in Europe."

Thus he tells of the legendary life of Krishna at Mathura, from which is drawn the episode of the combat between this young god and the ancient god of the Vedas, Indra (Polier, 1986, p.p. 94-95): "Rajah *Ainder* was very vexed no longer to be honored by the farmers of Brindaban in the manner to which he had become

accustomed and, learning that it was at the instigation of *Chrisnen* that he was being refused these honors, he resolved as harsh punishment for this lack of respect to cast confusion upon the one who was responsible for this, and who was a simple mortal in his eyes. Thus he ordered *Deiotas*, guardian of the rain, to select the most abundant, most terrible rain, the one used for deluges, and to make it fall in torrents for seven days and nights on the village of Brindaban and its surroundings, so as to submerge the men and animals, but to be careful that not a drop should fall on the neighboring areas. Following this command a violent storm accompanied by rain sprang up; at first it did not shock the farmers, but as it gained force during the following days, and fell in torrents which sounded like thunder, the inhabitants of the farms, in the fear caused by such unusual weather, addressed themselves to *Chrisnen*, who ordered them to gather themselves and their herds at the foot of Mount Goverdhana.

“When they were assembled, the incarnation inflated his stature and his powers and lifted up the mountain; holding it with his little finger, he covered them as if with an umbrella, and placed in safety this multitude that Rajah *Ainder* wanted to destroy. The latter, seeing that by this prodigious feat his revenge was annihilated, began to suspect the divinity of *Chrisnen*, and soon discovered, in fact, that in his human guise the so-called son of *Nanda* was the All-Powerful, and he halted the storm, filled with shame and confusion at his mistake; he ran to throw himself at the feet of the incarnation, from whom he humbly begged forgiveness for his transgression. Raising him up benevolently, the incarnation said that he excused him all the more readily as the god could have prevented his transgression by dispelling the *maya* that had made him commit it.

Law de Lauriston describes the town of Mathura as he saw it in 1758, after the terrible depredations to which the Patanes subjected this region in 1757. He is more sensitive to the commercial and economic role of Mathura, however, than to its mythic riches within the Indian universe (1913, p. 356): “The most remarkable is Matura, on the banks of the Gemna; it boasts of privilege, but in spite of this it was no more spared than the others. One sees a beautiful mosque decorated in mosaics done in the same spirit as that of Benares, and a very fine pier of cut stone. Four *cosses* from

this town is Bindrabonne, a small village much acclaimed among the Nobles, where one sees on the banks of a pond the famous tree onto which Vishnu transported the clothes of many bathing girls, and which he wanted to return to them on the condition that once out of the water they saluted him – the alleged origin of the institution of saluting of Brahmins.”

In his “Cahier des Routes,” added on to the end of his memoir, while speaking of Mathura, Law de Lauriston wrote (Title?????, 1913, p. 511): “We crossed Matura and camped above the banks of the Gemna. Matura is a large and beautiful city belonging to Djates, and consecrated to Vishnu, who has a famous pagoda there. Along the Gemna one sees a very fine pier of cut stone. In the city one sees as well a beautiful mosque decorated with mosaics. This city was filled with merchants, and especially *saokars* who regarded the place as a sacred asylum.”

His mention of the mosque of Mathura is interesting, for this city is especially renowned as a highly mythic site for the Hindus. Tieffenthaler, Polier, and Lauriston were the only ones to speak of Mathura; it seems that in general the French at the end of the eighteenth century were better acquainted with the southern part of India, which they undoubtedly had more occasion to explore.

Benares

But even those who never had the opportunity to visit the valley of the Ganges had at the very least heard of the city of Benares, and were often aware of its mythic importance in the Indian imagination. They knew that the French public was already familiar with the description of Benares through the writings of travelers in the seventeenth century, such as Tavernier and Berber. This is why Jean-Baptiste Chevalier, for one, does not waste time describing it in his accounts of his travels in India, even though he went there in October, 1763, during his return to Agra (1984, p. 88): “These different provinces are today so well known that I would bore the reader with a description that would only be a repetition of what has been written before.”

Lauriston likewise does not linger much on it in his memoir because he was too preoccupied at the time in seeking an Indian prince to grant subsidies to his little band of French mercenaries.

During the preparation of his notes for publication around 1773, however, he added a long note on Benares in the appendix, drawing his information from such English authors as Dow, Scrafton, and Holwell. In the following note he describes Benares as "the center of the nobles" (1913, p.p. 543–544) and "the residence of many *saokars* and bankers." As for the role this city played in relation to other religious centers, he writes (1913, p.p. 543–544): "It is at Benares, otherwise known as Coshi, that the university of the Brahmin is located, the most famous one, for we must add that there are others at Conjuvaram in the Carnatek for Brahmin and noble doctors of the peninsula; they are named Pandet, Gosseyns, and one addresses oneself to these universities when there are disputes among castes."

Jacques Maissin recognized Benares simply as a great place for the teaching of Sanskrit, where his English friends, such as Charles Wilkins, went to be initiated into the texts of this language (1975, p. 111). It is nevertheless surprising that someone so interested in the Hindu religion did not take the trouble to better inform himself on Benares.

The abbé Dubois did not visit this city either; but many times he stresses its quasi-mystical importance to the Hindus, especially among the Brahmins. When, in presenting the portrait of an ideal guru according to Hindu texts, he cites the places where he should have stayed, giving us at the same time a catalogue of the great holy sites in India dedicated to Shiva, his catalogue begins naturally with Kashi-Benares (1825, I, p. 165). All in all, the attraction of Benares for French travelers, thirsting to understand the depths of the sacred texts of the Hindu religion, was immense. The best example of this is Anquetil-Duperron who, upon arriving in Bengal in 1755, decided to go there at the first opportunity (*Zend-Avesta*, 1771, p.p. 37–38): "On the spot I decided to go to Cassimbazar, and from there to Benares. It was in this city that I wanted to devote myself to the study of Sanskrit. Although I knew it to be a ruin and depopulated by continual warfare, I counted on finding there one of the Brahmins whom the Schools had made so famous."

Until the final days of his stay in India, which he was obliged to cut short for reasons of health, Anquetil still hoped "to go to Benares to research and translate the Vedas themselves, which are like the repository of Indian Antiquity" (*Zend-Avesta*, 1771, I, p. 368).

On other occasions he speaks of it as “the center of Indianism” (*Journal des savants*, 1776) and as “the city where the most famous and most talented Brahmins of Hindustan reside” (*Recherches historiques*, 1786–1789, II, p. 296). Until his death in 1805, Anquetil unceasingly sought to compensate for his missed visit to Benares through the detailed study of Indian sacred texts and by listening anxiously to all who had the fortune of going there.

The French travelers to India at the end of the eighteenth century thus spared no effort in attempting to penetrate the meaning concealed within its legends and symbols. With the help of certain Indian intermediaries (benevolent scholars such as Ramtchund in the case of de Polier, temple priests in the case of Sonnerat and Le Gentil de la Galaisière) or thanks to their own understanding of the Indian languages (like Legouz de Flaix and the abbé Dubois), a great number among them succeeded in gleaning a rather precise idea of the different cults, deities, and Indian religious legends. For Sonnerat, Indian religion went back to very ancient times, to the times of Pythagoras and Alexander the Great at the very least. For Le Gentil de la Galaisière, it was undoubtedly as old as the religion of Egypt. They identified many other aspects of Hindu mythology and rituals, such as the extraordinary holocausts and sacrificing of victims observed by Chevalier at Gauhati in Assam (Chevalier, 1984, pp. 35–39), the bloody hangings by iron hooks, as related by Sonnerat (1782, I, p. 244), to which the penitents of Mariatale, the “pariate goddess” of the country of the Tamils, submitted themselves voluntarily, or the walking on hot coals recounted with an entirely scientific objectivity by Le Gentil de la Galaisière at Pondicherry (1780, I, pp. 268–275). To analyze them all is beyond the scope of this article. This quick survey nonetheless allows us to ascertain the extent to which the accounts of these travelers confirm the opinion of Voltaire, who saw India as the “birthplace of all religions.”

Translated from the French by Sophie Hawkes

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