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## Friedrich max müller a scholar extraordinaire

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### Abstract

German comparative philologist, and Indologist Friedrich Max Müller (1823 – 1900) was one of the founders of the science of religion. His works on Indology were both scholarly and popular. His connections with the East India Company and with the Sanskrit scholars at Oxford University led to a career in Britain where he became the leading commentator on the culture of India. Intellectual discourse and exchanges between him and the intellectual elite of India led to the reformation of the evil customs of child marriage and sati. Müller believed that the study of a language was tied to the belief system of that culture. Müller was deeply influenced by Kant's transcendental model of spirituality and published a translation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. Müller was opposed to Darwin's theory of evolution. His rich legacy endures in the learning and research in all matters relating to language, literature, and religion.

**Keyword:** Sanskrit, philology, vedas, European languages, reformation, Hinduism, upanishads, evolution

### Introduction

In a letter to his son, Müller wrote, 'We must learn to see a meaning in everything'. This was the essence of Müller's study of Sanskrit, which went on to the study of the Rig Veda, the Upanishads, and the critical study of the relationship between language and belief systems. His aim was also to trace the evolution of Indian religious and philosophical thought as demonstrated in the Vedas. His views brought him into conflict with the Church and other pagan bodies, but Müller stayed away from all of them as he went on to formulate a philosophy of religion that addressed the crisis of faith. Müller was wary of Darwin's theory of evolution and specifically disagreed with Darwin's theories on the origin of language. Müller put forward a theory of a 'Turanian' family of languages. Müller published several scholarly works. He is best known for his edition of the collection of Sanskrit hymns the Rig Veda Samhita. He is also known for his work as editor of The Sacred Books of the East, a 50-volume set of English translations prepared under his direction. Müller has been credited with founding the discipline of the Science of Religion. Though his ideas were strongly contested, Müller carried on his study of religions. He believed that the Science of Religion, when elaborated, would change the world. Müller's great contribution as an Indologist served to bring about reforms too as he, along with Indian intellectuals, questioned the terrible practices of child marriage and sati.

### Objective

This study on Friedrich Max Müller's Life and Works seeks to establish his deep interest in and scholarship of the Vedas. As a philologist Müller pursued the science of religions and acknowledged that religion had developed differently in different linguistic spheres. His study of Sanskrit and his connections with India through the East India Company made him a leading intellectual commentator on the culture of India. His translations of the Rig Veda and Kant's Critique were critically acclaimed. He funded and edited a series of English translations of religious texts. Müller devoted the last thirty years of his life to writing and lecturing on comparative religion.

### Review

In his day, Friedrich Max Müller was a man of national and international importance. His achievements as a Sanskrit scholar won him a reputation as a comparative linguist and

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investigator of the early history of religion. The connection between Sanskrit and the modern European languages deeply influenced thought. The Indian influence was irresistible and as Müller talked about the Aryan man and the Aryan race, through the study of language, he explored the mind of the earliest civilized man. The Aryan man had been Greek, Roman, German and Indian. The origins of religion were a burning topic, and as Darwin propounded his Theory of Evolution, there were clashes of thought between him and Müller. After his death a memorial fund was opened at Oxford for the promotion of learning and research in all matters relating to the history and archaeology, the languages, literatures and religions of ancient India.

### Müller's Life and Work

Philologist and Orientalist Friedrich Max Müller was born in Germany on 6 December 1823 in Dessau into a highly cultured family. An intensive education in Leipzig culminated in his study of philology at Leipzig University. He displayed an aptitude for classical languages, learning Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit. In 1844, he continued his study and research of Sanskrit under Franz Bopp, the first scholar of the Indo-European languages, and also began to translate the Upanishads for Friedrich Schelling, with whom he was studying in Berlin. This was when Müller's life took a significant turn and, under Schelling's guidance, he began to relate the history of language to the history of religion. This period was also significant because it is when Müller published his first book, the *Hitopadesa*, a collection of Indian fables.

1845 saw Müller in Paris where he studied Sanskrit with Eugène Burnouf. Müller's scholarship was such that Burnouf encouraged him to publish the complete Rig Veda, using the manuscripts that were available in England. In 1846, Müller moved to England to study the Sanskrit texts which were in the possession of the East India Company. India was part of the British Empire at that time and Müller's connections with the East India Company and Sanskrit scholars at Oxford University, led to his becoming a leading intellectual commentator on the culture of India.

Exchanges between Indian and British intellectuals followed, leading to a deeper understanding of India. Müller's links with the Brahmo Samaj helped in these intellectual and cultural exchanges. Müller's Sanskrit studies came at a time when the development of language and the development of culture were being linked by scholars. Müller believed that the study of language is related to the study of the culture it belonged to. Thus, there is a close correlation between language and the belief systems of that culture. The Vedic culture of India was considered to pre-date European Classical cultures. Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas was thought to be the oldest of the Indo-European languages. Müller believed the earliest documents of Vedic culture were the key to understanding pagan European religions.

At this time, in the West, though little was known of the Vedas, there was an increasing interest in the philosophy of the Upanishads. Müller believed that the philosophy of the Upanishads could be linked to the primitive henotheism of early Vedic Brahmanism. Müller coined the word 'Henotheism' to mean devotion to a single god while accepting the existence or possible existence of other deities. However, Müller needed to see the documents held by the British East India Company. He soon persuaded them to allow him to undertake a critical study of the Rig Veda.

Müller's scholarship of Sanskrit enabled him to study and understand the Rig Veda, the most ancient of Vedic Scriptures. He worked on the critical edition of the Rig Veda, from 1849 to 1874, a work for which he is most remembered. He translated the Rig Veda Samhita written by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit scholar Sayanacharya. Müller was also deeply impressed by Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a proponent of Vedic philosophy.

Müller saw the gods of the Rig Veda as active forces of nature, partly personified as imagined supernatural persons, that is to say, 'gods' began as words expressing abstract ideas, and then got transformed into imagined personalities. Thus, the Indo-European father-god has various names: Zeus, Jupiter, Dyaus Pita. Müller traced all these words to Dyaus which he took to mean 'shining' or 'radiance'. Consequently, Deva, deus, and theos came to be generic terms for a god, linked to Zeus and Jupiter.

In 1888, Müller was appointed Gifford lecturer at the University of Glasgow. Over the next four years Müller gave four series of lectures:

Natural Religion – an introductory discourse which defined Natural Religion in its widest sense.

Physical Religion – a history of the discovery of the infinite behind the finite.

Anthropological Religion – a discourse on how different nations arrived at a belief of a soul.

Theosophy or Psychological Religion – an examination of the relation between God and the soul.

Müller's final Gifford lecture is significant in the interpretation of his work.

An important project that Müller undertook was the founding and editing of a series of English translations of Indian, Arabic, Chinese, and Iranian religious texts.

In 1881, Müller published a translation of Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. He speaks of Kant's critique as 'another Aryan heirloom, as precious as the Veda'. Müller, influenced by Kant's Transcendental philosophy, was opposed to Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection and development. His argument was that 'language forms an impassable barrier between man and beast'.

As an Indologist, Müller expressed his view that Hinduism needed to go through a 'reformation'. He believed that every religion is exposed to inevitable decay. Müller had cultivated many friendships with Indians through correspondence and their visits to Oxford. He was close to Keshub Chunder Sen, and deeply interested in the Brahmo Samaj. He used his links with the Brahmo Samaj to encourage such a reformation. Müller was deeply influenced by Rammohan Roy and paying homage to him said that he had found the points of convergence and concord between the three bodies of culture, the three bodies of civilizations which were then in conflict – the Hindu, the Moslem, and the Christian. He believed that the translation of the Veda would show the people the root of their religion. He encouraged a study of ancient Indian literature as part of education to instil a feeling of national pride and self-respect.

Müller was extremely concerned about the practice of child marriage in India. A study of Müller's inaugural Hibbert lecture by D. Menant, argued that a crucial role was played by Müller and social reformer Behramji Malabari in initiating debates on the twin curses of child marriage and sati in India. Pandita Ramabai, another close friend of Müller's helped him in this cause.

Believing education could fight social evils, Müller wrote to the newly-appointed Secretary of State for India, George

Campbell, in 1868, to increase funding for education in India. He wanted to promote a new form of literature combining Western and Indian traditions. 'A new national literature will bring with it a new national life, and new moral vigour. As to religion, that will take care of itself', were his words to Campbell.

As a philologist, instead of using the prevailing ethnographic approach, Müller pursued the science of religion by studying words and texts. He acknowledged that religion developed differently in different linguistic spheres. His training, however, limited him to the study of the Aryan people, that, is speakers of the Indo-European languages. He, however, was convinced that the Rig Veda provided access to the study of how religion came into being.

Müller was a pioneer in Mythology. He used comparative linguistics in his research methodology as he examined natural phenomena. Though subsequent methodologists used different methods of study and changed the focus to include psychological phenomena, and psychoanalytic methodologies, Müller's pioneering efforts were instrumental in establishing mythology as an academic discipline.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Müller's book-length essay on Comparative Mythology inspired evolutionist thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Edward Burnett Tylor and made philology into one of the master sciences.

Müller's career in Oxford started in 1851. His first series of lectures was on comparative philology. He was appointed Taylorian Professor of Modern European Languages in 1854 and earned a full degree of Master of Arts by Decree of Convocation. In 1860, he was not awarded the Chair of Sanskrit, much to his dismay. However, in 1868, Müller became the first Professor of Comparative Philology, a position founded on his behalf. He held the Chair until his death. After his death, a memorial fund was instituted for 'the promotion of learning and research in all matters relating to the history and archaeology, the languages, literatures, and religions of ancient India'.

### Controversies

- a) Anti-Christian. During his Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, Müller was criticized for being anti-Christian. Müller distanced himself from all the different theories that were put forward to prove this.
- b) Darwin disagreement. Müller disagreed strongly with Darwin's theories on the origin of language, and that the language of man could have developed from the language of animals.
- c) Aryanism. Müller's work on Aryan culture was seen as some critics as being racist with the Indo-European (Aryan) traditions in opposition to the Semitic religions. He was deeply saddened by this. He believed that his work on the common Indian and European ancestry was in itself a powerful argument against any form of racism.
- d) Turanian. Müller had put forward and promoted the theory of a 'Turanian' family of languages. These were the Finnic, Samoyedic, Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic languages. He said these five languages were those 'spoken in Asia or Europe not included under the Aryan and Semitic families, with the exception of Chinese and its dialects'. He also said these were 'nomadic' languages as opposed to Aryan and Semitic, which were State or political languages. Though not accepted at the time, later the idea was absorbed into the nationalist ideologies of Turkey and Hungary.

### Müller's Legacy

Müller's study of and reliance on the Rig Veda to explain the origin of religions, and his interpretations of mythology were strongly contested by the scholars of the day. R.F. Littledale suggested that 'Müller who had risen in the east (Germany) and come to the west (England), to bring illumination, was himself a solar myth'. Müller's study of religions continued unabated. He wrote, 'The Science of Religion may be the last of the sciences which man is destined to elaborate; but when it is elaborated, it will change the aspect of the world.'

Müller edited a 50-volume set of English translations of Asian religious writings, *The Sacred Books of the East*. This monumental work incorporates the essential sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Islam.

### Müller was the recipient of many awards

In 1869 he was elected to the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres as a foreign correspondent.

In 1874 Müller was awarded the Pour le Mérite.

In 1875 he was awarded the Bavarian Maximilian Order for Science and Art.

In 1896 Müller was appointed a member of the Privy Council. The Goethe Institutes in India are named Max Müller Bhavans in his honour.

### Müller was a prolific writer. His published works are

*The Languages of the Seat of War in the East: With a Survey of the Three Families of Language, Semitic, Arian and Turanian* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1855)

*A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature: So Far as it Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1859)

*Chips from a German Workshop* (London: Longmans, 1867)

*The Science of Thought* (London: Longmans, 1887)

*Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas* (London: Longmans, 1888)

*Buddhist Mahâyâna Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894)

*Collected Works*, 18 volumes (London: Longmans, 1898)

(trans. and ed.) *The Sacred Books of the East*, 51 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879-1910)

*My Autobiography: A Fragment* (London: Longmans, 1901)

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