

40 years Indian Studies at Sofia University

40 години специалност „Индология“ в Софийския университет

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The 40th commemoration of the launch of the Indian Studies Programme at Sofia University was marked with a three-day national conference featuring international participation under the title “Narrating India: Traditions, Attitudes and Directions”, which was held from October 16 to 18, 2023.

The conference welcomed attendees from a diverse range of countries, including Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, India, Norway, Poland, and Russia. In addition, esteemed individuals who had completed their studies within Sofia University’s Indian Studies Programme and have gone on to teach at renowned universities in Germany, Canada, the United States, and other nations, also participated in the event. The primary objective of the forum was to showcase the latest accomplishments of both Bulgarian and international Indologists and scholars engaged in academic research related to Indian culture.

The Aula in the Rectorate hosted the inauguration of the academic forum. During the opening ceremony, Prof. Milena Bratoeva, Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Classical and New Philologies, underscored the significant role of Sofia University’s Indian Studies Programme in enhancing the understanding of India in Bulgaria and in nurturing a considerable number of Bulgarian experts who have achieved notable success both within the country and on the global stage. The Indian Ambassador to Bulgaria Sanjay Rana congratulated Sofia University for the work that has been accomplished so far and pointed out that the Centre for Eastern Languages and Cultures has become one of the leading centers of Indian studies in Europe.

The official addresses from the rector Prof. A.Gerdzhikov and the dean of the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philologies Prof. Madeleine Danova were followed by a 30-minute lecture, read by the keynote speaker at the conference Prof. Knut Jacobsen, a professor and lecturer in Religious Studies in the Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion at the University of Bergen, Norway. His presentation “Two, one, zero Kapilas: Kapila in Hinduism and Indology” explored the numerous identities of Kapila’s ancient figure, considered the founder of the Sāṃkhya philosophical system. His analysis of Kapila’s personality led him to conclude that the Indian sources know not one but a couple of figures, known as Kapila, which are quite contradictory in their essence. His thought-provoking presentation put the question of how Western and Indian traditions construe their worldviews. What for Western scholars appears to be ‘history’ happens to be a ‘myth’ for Indic traditions and what Indic traditions would consider ‘history’, Western scholars would unambiguously consider a ‘myth’.

After the lecture of Prof. Jacobsen the program continued with the first panel of the conference, which was dedicated to the Vedic texts. The session was launched by the paper of Prof. M. Bratoeva, an expert on Vedic and Sanskrit literature. Her topic, entitled “Brahma is austerity: an attempt to approach performatively to Bhṛguvalli chapter of *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (3.1-6)” drew the attention of the audience to the pragmatic function of the sacred language, employed in the *Upaniṣadic* text as an effective performative tool to make the hearers of it (the disciples) to imagine themselves as identical with the portrayed personage Bhṛgu. The panel continued with the presentation of Assoc. Prof. Ivan Andrijačić from the University of Zagreb, who raised a question on the credibility of using some of the modern methodologies for the verification of ancient texts. The next participant joined the session from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Prof. C. Upender Rao explored the importance of mind in Ancient India, stressing the necessity of a holistic approach in medical treatment, integrating both the importance of the physical and mental state of the individual. The Vedic cosmogonic views and concepts of Time were examined in the next paper, read by Assoc. Prof. Leonid Kulikov from Ghent University. An interesting perspective in the field of cognitive linguistics on the conceptualization of the heart as a cave was presented by Assoc. Prof. G. Ruseva. The discourse in cognitive linguistics was continued by Dr. Al. Bogdanov who explored the various aspects of the metaphorical understanding of ritual speech as a chariot.

The second panel was more diverse in topics. It was launched by a guest from Hungary, Dr. L. Főrizs who analyzed the life and the poetry of one of the most important but less researched Vedic poet priests *Dīrghatamas*. The next presentation was given by B. Mitruiev, a Junior Research Associate at the Kalmyk Scientific Center of the RAS. He presented scientific data on two Kalmyk seals in Sanskrit, clarified the content of the inscriptions, and offered an interesting hypothesis of their

origin. The highlight of this panel was the presentation, given by Prof. Shashibala, Dean of K. M. Munshi Centre of Indology in the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, New Dehli. She gave an inspirational 15-minute lecture on femininity as divine power (*Shakti tattva*) in Indian mythology and put forward the discourse on women and their social status in a country like India. The end of this panel was given by Assoc. Prof. T. Miązek from the Department of Indology in Wroclaw, Poland. She discussed the theory “from the story to the drama on the stage” of the Hindi writer and theater director D. R. Ankur in his pursuit to search for the roots of Hindi theater.

Womanhood and social issues were the main accent in the third and final for the first day of the conference panel. It began with the papers of two graduates of the Indraprastha College for Women. Prof. R. Sethi gave a talk on how body, sexuality, and desire are presented in four of Krishna Sobti’s novels. The reading of a woman’s desires and her awareness about her body and sexuality has been an important tool for breaking up the patriarchal norm and redefining the identity of Sobti’s personages. Assoc. Prof. V. Sinha on her part critically examined the female voices in some of Anamika’s poems, revealing the depths of female pride and the unique feature of resilience of some of her characters. Her online presentation was notably enhanced by the interview she had with the author of the poems herself. The next contributor was Dr. J. Sharma from Sant Hirdaram Girls College in Bhopal who dedicated her research on the less examined aspect of Jaishankar Prasad’s plays – the female characters. She demonstrated how most of the female characters in his plays follow and respect the traditions of India and at the same time are in favor of new directions and changes which was in accord with Prasad’s beliefs and views on the development of an independent India. The most emotional and inspirational presentation was undoubtedly that of Dr. G. Nik Ilieva whose focus was Susham Bedi’s insights on the complex nature of the immigrants’ experience. The Indologist spoke about her friendship with the author and gave several examples from first hand experience with representatives of the immigrant community in the USA. The major questions Dr. Nik Ilieva raised were about acculturation and assimilation, integration and separation, adaptation and marginalization. The closing paper was given by Maria Puri, a scholar and translator from Poland, who made research on life writings, authored by Indian women, and discussed particularly the Neelakshi Singh’s latest book, the autobiography *Hukum deś kā ikkā khoṭa* / “When the Ace of Spade turns out to be a fake”.

The second day of the program differed in spirit as the conference room turned into a tribune for really fruitful and constructive debates on different scholarly issues. The first panel combined papers from various fields. The opening presentation, entitled “To look at the spring – the word *cheśm* in Persian, Hindi, and Bulgarian Language”, was a team-work research between the Indian and the Iranian studies. Dr. S. Kostadinova, Assist. Y. Hristova and Dr. N. Yankov traced back the etymology of the word “*cheśm*” from the Proto-European root **k^weć* – with the se-

mantics of “see” or “look” and outlined the journey of the word, its spreading from the Persian language into Hindi and Bulgarian language and the semantic transformations and distinctive characteristics that these words acquired during their adaptation into a foreign land. Dr. V. Chervenkova-Antonova presented her views on how Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry in the collection “Stray Birds” is reminiscent of the traditional Japanese lyrical genre of *haiku* and how Japanese *haiku* is used as an effective therapeutic tool in various mental and psychiatric conditions. The next study was presented by the art historian P. Dimitrova-Racheva who outlined the contributing moments of Boris Georgiev’s publications about India, made between 1934–1937. The most captivating presentation that enlivened the audience with plenty of positive reactions was that of Dr. S. Doklev from the Arabian Studies Department who gave a talk on how the tenth-century Arabian traveler al-Biruni, often called the “first anthropologist” and “the father of Indology”, not only pictured India with scrutiny and objectivity, which were rare phenomenon for his times but also how skillfully he tried to justify Hindu cultural and religious peculiarities in front of the Islamic world.

The second panel maintained the spirit and the atmosphere of the previous one as Prof. T. Evtimova added to the topic of al-Biruni’s work *Kitab-ul-Hind*, by examining his contribution to the Indian history from an Indological point of view. According to her Biruni’s work easily may be described as “Encyclopaedia Indica”. This diversity in perspectives was followed up by the next paper of Dr. S. Kostadinova from the Iranian department who in her work aimed to reveal the symbolism of the lotus flower in the Persian literature of its classical period and answer the question of whether the flower is associated with beauty, spirituality and purity as in Indian culture, or is present in a different way within the Persian poetic tradition. The next contributor, Dayana Ivanova, a researcher at the Department of African and Indo-Pacific Studies, presented Vietnam’s long-standing cultural interactions with Hinduism, by acquainting the audience with one of the most significant Hindu temples, located in the centre of Ho Chi Minh City – Mariamman Temple. A lot of meaningful and useful questions were provoked by the paper of the next contributor, Yashar Abdulselyamoglu from the Iranian Department who elaborated on Max Weber’s ideas on asceticism and mysticism, especially in the comparative approach of world religions. The very rich and intriguing panel was closed with another philosophical approach to Indian culture. Dr. K. Yankova expressed her ideas on sacred sounds and invocations, especially in connection with the magical, the invisible, and these states of consciousness, which perceive different aspects of reality, including the dream and the dreamless state.

“If someone wants to know India, then it is very important to know the people of India” – sounded the statement that underlined the next paper. The next panel was orientated more or less toward pop and folk culture. It began with Dr. I. Kyulanova’s paper “What’s Indian about Netflix’s Indian Matchmaking?”. The paper

raised the question of stereotypization of Indianness, and showed the difference between what is expected to be “Indian” and what is “real” Indian in a popular production like Indian Matching. Dr. A. Pathak from Pandit Ravishnagr Shukla University researched the Kajri folk songs of North India as a predecessor of the so-called *Nirgun* cult of the *bhakti* movement which sees the divine in its indefinite and indefinable forms in contrast to the cult which portrays God in definite forms and characteristics. The analysis of folk beliefs of the region of North India continued with Dr. P. Robova’s comparative analysis of different aspects of two classes of mountain deities – *lha* and *pari* – among the Brogpa community in Ladakh – an interesting example of the cohesion of Buddhist and Islamic influences. Dr. L. Klasanova on her part offered valuable insight on the image and concept of *ḍākinī* within the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Although the two traditions developed in parallel in India, still they have their own specific features that set them apart. The concept of *ḍākinī*, which refers to both an individual female figure and a class of deities, varies significantly and in some texts, the term denotes a race of demons who eat the flesh or life essence of humans, while in other under *ḍākinī* is meant the name of a goddess who is often associated with one of the energy centers (*cakra*) or seven basic elements (*dhātu*) of the human body.

“People of God: On Understanding Christianity and Religious Belonging in India” was the title for the first presentation from the third and last panel for the day. It was presented by Dr. I. Angelova from the University of Bremen. In her paper, she elucidated the lifeworlds of the Christianized minorities from the Naga and Mizo ethnic groups that migrate in the capital of New Delhi. The paper offered valuable reflections on how their choices reflected their lives, social status and identity. The next contributor returned on the table the discussion of Vedic philosophy, by setting forth Roberto Calasso’s (1941–2021) interpretation of Vedic myths. Calasso built his fiction stories on a vast number of texts, dedicated to Indian ritual and its founding myths for the purpose of rewriting the narrative regarding the origins of Indo-European civilization and literature. Dr. D. Haas from the University of Vienna presented the results of his ongoing research on the Vedic text *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad*. By using the discipline of text linguistics and its methods such as recurrence, coreference and coherence he analyzed the structure, concept, and creative process of the text and argued that from the very beginning, *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad* was conceived as a compilation intended to combine new contemplative and yogic teachings with the ritual mysticism of the Vedic *Agnicāyana* ceremony. The next paper carried the audience into the field of divination. Georgi Krastev, a PhD student, explored the topic of dream consciousness and the specific methods of obtaining visionary experiences, characteristic of some Tantric and Buddhist schools. In the next presentation, Prof. D. Dimitrova from the University of Monreal studied the concept of yoga and *bhakti* in the tradition of Radhasoami, by analyzing the main ritual practice of this branch, known as *surat śabda yoga* (yoga of the sound of the in-

ner current) and its annual pilgrimage tradition. The second day of the conference concluded with a presentation by Dr. Kanchan Sharma, a visiting professor in the Indology department at the University of Sofia. Dr. Sharma offered her insights on the interconnectedness of fine arts and performing arts within the framework of Indian traditions. Her perspective, as a modern scholar and a poetess, uniquely encompassed both aspects, enriching the discourse.

The last day of the conference commenced with a presentation by the MA student, R. Boshnyashka, who delved into the earliest texts, focusing exclusively on the profound concept of “renunciation of the world” within the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*. She offered a thorough analysis of Brahmanical asceticism, its objectives, and its distinctive characteristics. It was followed by the PhD student T. Bentecheva’s presentation on another text from the Upaniṣadic tradition – *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*. Her research focused on the specificity and the meaning of the concept of the supreme personal God (*Īśa*) and his immanent presence within man. Another PhD student M. Karagyozeva talked about the concepts of the creative process of consciousness in the tradition of Kashmir Shaivism and its ideas on the subject of the primordial vibration, called *spanda*. The next presentator in this panel was the PhD student A. Nacheva who explored the etymology and semantic evolution of the word *kośa* as found in the *R̥gveda*, *Atharvaveda*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the principal *Upaniṣads*, and Shankara’s commentaries. Eliya Alichkova, also a PhD student in the Indology Department, closed this panel with her presentation on the concept of karma and momentariness as contained in the Buddhist *Yogācārā* school.

The closing panel varied much in subjects. It started with Prof. I. Vlaeva’s talk on the peculiarities of A. R. Rahman’s works, his development as a musician and producer and the huge impact he has had on Indian cinema and music. The panel continued with two papers on political issues. Assoc. Prof. V. Petroussenko from the University of Plovdiv “Paisii Hilendarski” outlined the main changes in the political environment in India in the last decade. Dr. I. Lidarev, a specialist in Indo-China relations, expanded upon his insights regarding Indian diplomacy. He delivered a detailed and strongly substantiated analysis of the emergence of Buddhist diplomacy as a key component of India’s approach to address the growing Chinese influence in the Southeast region. His presentation raised intriguing questions about the challenges that these two economic powerhouses will confront in the future. The panel continued with Dr. M. Kaushik’s paper on the identity and legacy of the little but significant in respect of cultural impact over India Parsi community. The last contributor of the panel was Dr. B. Kamova, whose paper shed light on the dynamic nature of the Ancient Indian law books. She demonstrated how the contained in the texts prescriptions altered in time and shifted in their views about the strictness of the norms, especially those concerning the relation between social class and professional specialization. The conference concluded with a brief recap of the three days of scholarly exchange, provided by Dr. Nikolay Yankov, the Head

of the Indology Department at Sofia University. The audience was also extended an invitation to attend three public lectures on various aspects of the Indian cultural heritage, featuring some of the distinguished guests who participated in the event.

The conference was a resounding success in achieving its primary goal, which was to provide a platform for the exchange of ideas within the broader scope of East Asian studies and facilitate dialogue between the East and the West in the context of globalization. The event was organized by the Indian Studies Section of the Classical East Studies Department, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology (FCMPh) of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (SU), in cooperation with the Embassy of India in Bulgaria, East-West Indological Foundation and Devam Foundation.

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