

MADHAV M. DESHPANDE

PROFESSOR R.N. DANDEKAR  
MARCH 17, 1909–DECEMBER 11, 2001

At an English literature class at the New English School in Pune, the teacher asked a question: ‘Who was Shakespeare?’ One of the students raised his hands and answered: ‘Sir, I think he was kept by Elisabeth!’ The teacher, who normally had a stern face and rarely showed his lighter side, broke into laughter. The teacher was Professor Ramchandra Narayan Dandekar, and one of the students in the class he taught was my father, Murlidhar V. Deshpande, who told this episode to me. My father was one of those lucky students who had Dandekar as his teacher both at the high school and college levels. Loved and respected, as well as feared by his students, for about two-thirds of the 20th century Professor Dandekar dominated the academic world of Pune, and wielded a wide-ranging influence on the fields of Sanskrit and Indological studies in India and the world at large. At the age of 93, he passed away in Pune on December 11, 2001.

If Sir R.G. Bhandarkar represented the peak of Indian Indology in the 19th century, R.N. Dandekar represents the peak of Indian Indology in the 20th century. Like Bhandarkar, Dandekar was a new brand of scholar. He was born in the town of Satara in Maharashtra on March 17, 1909. While this town was famous for its traditional Sanskrit pandits, to name Vāsudev Śāstrī Abhyankar among the most well known, Dandekar was not to follow the path of traditional Sanskrit scholarship. Again, like Bhandarkar, Dandekar was trained in the newly established modern Sanskrit scholarship at the Deccan College in Pune, the leading institution that was and is at the forefront of modern approaches to linguistic and historical scholarship in India. He earned an M.A. in Sanskrit from the Bombay University in 1931, and from the same University, he earned an M.A. in Ancient Indian Culture in 1933. Dandekar joined the Fergusson College in Pune in 1933 as Professor of Sanskrit and Ancient Indian Culture. In 1936, he went to Germany for further studies and received his doctoral degree from the Heidelberg University in 1938. Upon his return from Germany, he continued to teach at the Fergusson College, where he was made a Life-Member of the Deccan Education Society, the parent body of the Fergusson College. In 1950, he was appointed Professor of Sanskrit and



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Head of the Department of Sanskrit and Prakrit Languages at the University of Poona (the name recently changed to 'Pune'). He served as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1959–1965. In 1964, he became the Director of the Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit at the University of Poona, and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1974. In 1939, the very year he returned from Germany, Dandekar became the Honorary Secretary of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and he continued to function in that capacity till 1994, effectively running the Institute for fifty-five consecutive years. From 1994 till his death, he served as the Vice-President of the Institute. While the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute was really the love of his life, he was closely associated with numerous Indian and International Organizations and served and shaped these organizations in various ways. Among the organizations and institutions he was closely associated with, I would like to mention the All India Oriental Conference, the International Congress of Orientalists, the World Sanskrit Conference, the Deccan College, the Sanskrit Commission of the Government of India, among many others. He received numerous honors and awards, the most significant of them being the title of Padma Bhūṣaṇa bestowed upon him by the President of India in 1962. During the last few years of his life, it seemed that organizations and governments were almost competing with each other to bestow honor upon Dandekar. During one of my recent brief stays in Pune, Dandekar was honored by the Government of Assam. After the ceremony was over, he called me into his office and gave me the shawl that he had just received from the Government of Assam. It is a cherished memory of Dandekar for me.

Dandekar was a wonderful teacher, careful, methodical, and stern at the same time. During my student days at the University of Poona in 1966–1968, I attended his classes in the Ṛgveda and the Śaunakīya Atharvaveda. He would enter the class on time, and would close the door behind him. No latecomers allowed in his class. The only time I remember there was some laughter in the class was when some little child was standing outside one of the windows and making faces at us. There was no light conversation with students. Dandekar would open his notes and would start writing on the board and speak in a voice loud enough to be heard in other classrooms. It was through his blackboard, that most students got their very first acquaintance with names like Max Müller, Oldenberg, Hillebrandt, Geldner and Pischel. He would systematically review the interpretations of these scholars, and explain why he did or did not agree with them, and would finally pronounce his own judgment on the matter at hand. As students, overwhelmed with his authoritative delivery, we often learned to accept his interpretation as our final interpretation, no one having the

courage to dare to disagree with him. Therefore, I was not at all surprised to read J.R. Joshi, in his article on Uṣas, saying (1985: 159): ‘The only acceptable view, however, is that of DANDEKAR . . .’ While, during our student days, we had no courage to question any of Dandekar’s interpretations, his performance in class everyday had an explicit message to us: There is no authority beyond questioning. Each and every opinion, however authoritative, must be independently examined with our own judgment.

Very much in the spirit of R.G. Bhandarkar, Dandekar was a modern scholar, his critical approach trained both at the Deccan College and at Heidelberg. While he was fully familiar with modern European scholarship, more than most Indian scholars of his generation, he had a strong sense of confidence in his own right and ability to discern the validity of received opinions. While the typical scholarly presentation in India consisted of a display of who said what, with little effort to examine the cited authorities, Dandekar was not awed by the authority figures, be they Indian or Western. He was ready, willing, and able to examine and analyze, and if necessary to reject, the views of the established authorities.

Just as he was not awed by the authority of western scholars, he was not carried away by the pressures of Indian or Hindu nationalism. Referring to the Indian Indologists of the 19th century, R.N. Dandekar (1978: 7–8) makes some valuable comments: ‘Since about 1870, Indian scholars, who had been trained in the newly started universities and who had thereby become acquainted with the methodology and results of western scholarship, began seriously to cultivate Indological studies in their own country. . . . But they seem to have started with a kind of inferiority complex. On the one hand, they felt rather inordinately proud and jubilant at the new theory that the Indians belonged to the same stock as the Europeans, and, on the other, they were always on the defensive against the patronizing and mildly contemptuous attitude of the European scholars . . . , and, therefore, in order to counteract that attitude, indulged in self-glorification by making exaggerated claims about their ancient heritage. . . . But the most significant result of these developments was that the Indians no longer remained a passive object, like guinea pigs in a scientist’s laboratory, to be dissected and studied by European scholars.’ This comment shows Dandekar’s ability to look at his own predecessors and detect problems in their work.

To see where Dandekar stands historically, let me mention Peter Peterson’s *Hymns from the R̥gveda*. Peterson was Professor of Sanskrit at the Elphinstone College in Bombay. The first edition of his book was published in the Bombay Sanskrit Series (No. XXXVI) in 1888 under the auspices of the Department of Public Instruction. Through his

book, Peterson was motivating the study of the Ṛgveda by his Indian students in the direction of western scholarship of the day. Expressing his indebtedness to other scholars, Peterson says (*Preface to the First Edition*): ‘The obligations my book is under to Max Müller, the St. Petersburg Dictionary, Muir’s Sanskrit Texts, Geldner and Kaegi’s Siebenzig Lieder, Grassmann’s Dictionary and Translation, Ludwig’s Translation, are, I hope, apparent everywhere on the surface. I have given throughout references to Whitney’s Sanskrit Grammar, a book which must be useful to every student of the Ṛgveda.’ The second edition of *Hymns from the Ṛgveda* was published by Peterson himself in 1897. The third edition of *Hymns from the Ṛgveda* was published in 1905 by S.R. Bhandarkar (M.A., Professor of Sanskrit, Elphinstone College, Bombay). Bhandarkar now carried forward the project of keeping up with the latest western research on the Ṛgveda. In his *Preface to the Third Edition*, Bhandarkar says: ‘The original notes have, however, been supplemented by a few new ones. These have been drawn from Pischel and Geldner’s *Vedische Studien* (3 vols.), *Vedic Hymns* (Parts i and ii) in the *Sacred Books of the East*, Muir’s *Sanskrit Texts* (5 vols.), Whitney’s *Grammar*, Lanman’s *Noun-inflection in the Veda*, and other works.’ In 1917, the fourth edition of *Hymns from the Ṛgveda* was published by A.B. Dhruva (Professor of Sanskrit, Gujarat College, Ahmedabad). The book had continued to be used as a textbook prescribed for the students at the University of Bombay. Referring to his new additions, Dhruva says in the *Preface to the Fourth Edition*: ‘The new matter thus added comprises references to standard works on points of grammar, accent, metre, philology and mythology. . . . The subject of Vedic mythology is brought more prominently before the student; while the introduction of Indo-Iranian philology is an entirely new feature of the present edition. . . . With a view to helping the student to a systematic study of the work apart from the Notes, I have added to the old brief list a longer classified list of principal books in English bearing upon the subject.’ The fourth edition was reprinted by R.D. Karmarkar (Professor of Sanskrit, S.P. College, Pune) in 1937, and by H.D. Velankar (Professor Sanskrit, University of Bombay) in 1959. The edition in 1959 was ‘printed and published by Dr. R.N. Dandekar, M.A., Ph.D.’ at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune. With Professor R.N. Dandekar, we enter the latest phase of Sanskrit studies in Pune. Dandekar was continuing the same project of modernization of Sanskrit scholarship, a project that was begun by his European and Indian predecessors. However, he was not a mere link in the chain. He had many significant contributions of his own.

Among Dandekar's scholarly contributions,<sup>1</sup> his contributions to the field of Vedic studies are most extensive. His *Vedic Bibliography* is now reaching its sixth volume, the volume that he was working on till his last day. In the *Preface* to its first volume which came out in 1946, Dandekar says: 'The present *Vedic Bibliography* may be regarded as the continuation of the great work which has been done by RENOU through his *Bibliographie Védique*. I have tried to present through my *Bibliography* an exhaustive analytical register of all significant writings, dealing with the Veda and allied antiquities, which have been produced between 1930 and 1945. . . . This *Bibliography* contains about 3,500 entries which are divided subjectwise in 21 chapters and are further subdivided in 168 sections.' Each subsequent volume of the *Vedic Bibliography* has been bigger than the previous one, and one can only hope that this monumental work continues to be carried out by someone. Dandekar, in the same *Preface*, says that while he was writing an article 'Twenty-five Years of Vedic Studies' in 1943, he felt the most urgent need of a scientifically planned analytical bibliography of Veda and allied antiquities. Considering the valuable contribution made by Louis Renou's *Bibliographie Védique* (1931), Dandekar decided to carry out the project of *Vedic Bibliography* with his 'single-handed labour.' The comprehensive access to published scholarship on Vedic studies and related fields provided by Dandekar's *Vedic Bibliography* is further evident in the massive amount of references to this accumulated scholarship in his own articles on Vedic topics, as well as in the works of his students like V.G. Rahurkar and G.U. Thite. The message of Dandekar was that we cannot move ahead without reviewing the work previously published. We can disagree with our predecessors, but we cannot ignore them.

The remaining contribution of Dandekar to Vedic studies may be summed up by referring to his English translation of the several volumes of the *Śrautakośa*, published by the Vaidika Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala of Pune, and his numerous writings on Vedic mythology.<sup>2</sup> It was C.G. Kashikar who edited the Sanskrit materials for the *Śrautakośa* and the exhaustive English translation was prepared by Dandekar. It was a highly laborious project, but indeed worthwhile, and now provides a relatively easy access to abstruse details of Vedic sacrifices. In a large number of stimulating articles, Dandekar has discussed many prominent Vedic divinities individually and collectively and proposed what he terms 'the evolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> Dandekar's bibliography up to 1969 is included in Devasthali (1985) and from 1969–1984 is included in S.D. Joshi (1984).

<sup>2</sup> Most of Dandekar's articles have been collected in several convenient volumes published by Ajanta Publications from Delhi. See the Bibliography.

mythology' for the Vedas. Most of these articles have been collected in his 1979 volume *Vedic Mythological Tracts* published from Delhi. In Dandekar's own recent words (1997: 39):

1. The Ṛgvedic mythology cannot be said to have assumed a finite and finished form at any given moment. It would, therefore, be wrong to study that mythology as if it was a static phenomenon. The Ṛgvedic mythology had been throughout reacting and responding to the various vicissitudes in the cultural history of the Ṛgvedic age.
2. A particular Vedic god is seen to have been dominant in a particular period, because the personality and character of that god adequately reflected the ethos of that period.
3. Even after a Ṛgvedic god had been once conceived, his character did not remain unchanged. His personality, as it were, 'grew' – it often assumed a heterogeneous character on account of the different elements which came to be assimilated into it in conformity with the mythological ideology which had been undergoing constant modification.
4. The relationships among the various Ṛgvedic gods were governed by certain culture-historical compulsions.

In many of his writings, particularly in his *Some Aspects of the History of Hinduism* (1967), Dandekar weaves a master narrative of Indo-European and Indo-Aryan migrations and developments in Vedic religion consisting of various steps and stages within this master narrative. For example, Dandekar (1997: 41) says:

The dominant religious cult of the Proto-Aryan period was the Varuṇa cult. The last years of the Proto-Aryan period witnessed the migration of the Proto-Aryans towards Iran on the one hand and towards Saptasindhu or the Land of Seven Rivers on the other. The migration towards Saptasindhu meant for these people, whom we may now call Vedic Aryans, a drastic change in their way of life and thought, particularly after their fairly long sojourn in the region of Balkh. It was now a life of fateful confrontation with Vṛtras – human foes and environmental impediments – and of consequent warlike adventures. This new life of conquest and colonization called for a new religion and a new god. The cosmic religion of the world-sovereign Asura Varuṇa could no longer adequately meet the exigencies of the new age. The Vedic Aryans naturally craved for a heroic god who could bless and promote their onward march towards Saptasindhu and beyond. So was Vṛtrahā Indra 'born' in the Vedic pantheon.

Through such master narratives created by synthesizing available research and by using his 'constructive imagination,' Dandekar tried to account for all developments in Vedic and post-Vedic religion in such a way that the emergence of various gods, ideas, and philosophies seemed to flow 'naturally.' It is obvious that many of the details of such a reconstruction will not stand scrutiny in light of new research and emerging paradigms for reconstructing history. His evolutionary history sometimes appears to be rather too linear, and the cause-effect sequences for the developments rather built on circular arguments. His historicizing impulse led him to propose 'the mythological deification of the human hero Indra' (1997: 41) for which there is hardly any evidence to be found.

However, one cannot deny that Dandekar's powerful reconstruction of Indian religious history was an influential chapter in the history of modern Indology.

While Dandekar's ideas do not seem too revolutionary when considered within the frame of modern western scholarship on the Vedas, their impact in India needs to be judged by recognizing how he was, very much like R.G. Bhandarkar, appealing to his Indian students and colleagues to get fettered neither by the traditional paradigms of Sanskrit scholarship nor by the rising tide of Hindu nationalism. Dandekar, who had spent a lifetime researching the Vedic literature was at the same time aware of the historical limitations of the religion represented in and by the Vedas. He says (1967: 32): 'Another claim which is sometimes made for the Veda is that the Veda is the fountainhead of all Indian knowledge – that is, indeed, the mainspring of the entire Indian culture. So far as the history of Hinduism is concerned, suffice it to say that the protohistorical Hinduism obviously did not owe anything to the Veda, while historical Hinduism was affiliated to the Veda only in a formal and fortuitous manner.' This one single statement sets him apart from the Hindu nationalists of current times on one hand, and the Sanskrit traditionalists of ancient times on the other. Talking about ethical doctrines and the Upaniṣads, Dandekar (1967: 84) says: 'But all such ethical doctrines seem to have been introduced into the *Upaniṣads* only incidentally. For, the ultimate teaching of the *Upaniṣads* is as much beyond the range of mere moralism as of mere intellectualism. And it is, indeed, this feature which may be said to have proved both the strength and the weakness of the *Upaniṣads*.' Again, a rather politically incorrect thing to say in the face of rising Hindu nationalism.

Dandekar's abiding legacy is the necessity of critical thinking he instilled among his students and colleagues. In an extensive review of Bhandarkar's contributions to the history of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, Dandekar (1976: 25) does not let his respect for Bhandarkar deter him from pointing out flaws in his arguments: 'When RGB says that Vaiṣṇavism first appeared as a religious reform, he seems to suggest that it was orthodox in origin and that it represented an extension of Vedic thought in a particular direction. . . . The tendency to trace all religious ideologies – indeed, the entire Indian culture – back to the Veda, in some way or another, which characterised early Indology, is evident here.' Referring to Bhandarkar's opinion that a certain passage in the *Sabhāparvan* may be an interpolation, Dandekar (1976: 39) points out: 'the evidence of the *Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata* goes counter to it.' Rejecting Dahlmann's view that the *Mahābhārata* is the work of a single poet, and agreeing with Oldenberg's view to the contrary, Dandekar remarks (1990: 15): '*Prima facie* it would

appear that the *Mahābhārata* had not been the creation of one author or even of one generation of authors. It must have been the outcome of a long and continuous literary activity spread over many centuries. . . . We may further ask ourselves whether the epic, as we have it today, presents itself as a uniform, well-balanced, well-coordinated, homogeneous structure. The answer to this question would be a definite “no.” The epic unmistakably produces the impression of not belonging to one single literary stratum but of consisting of different layers of composition of unequal value. We see in it the handiwork at once of an inspired poet and a miserable bungler, of a wise sage and an innocent driveller, of a genuine artist and an overbearing pedant.’ In his *Foreword* to M.R. Yardi’s *The Bhagavadgītā as a Synthesis* (Pune, 1991: v–vi), Dandekar says: ‘In view of the prolific commentarial literature which has been produced on the *BG*, it becomes particularly incumbent upon a critical student first to unlearn much of it. One needs to begin with concerning oneself with what the *BG* itself says and not what others say it says.’ Then he lays out the questions that a critical student of the *Bhagavadgītā* must deal with: ‘The following are some of the questions which emerge from even a cursory – but perceptive – reading of the *BG*: How far can the *BG* be regarded as a well structured, logically argued, and systematically developed religio-philosophical treatise? Do we find internal coherence, precision, and orderliness in the arrangement of the text? How is Kṛṣṇaism related to Vedism? How does the *BG* stand vis-à-vis the *Mahābhārata*? What, after all, is the quintessential teaching of the *BG* which changed Arjuna’s initial position?’ Dandekar’s *Foreword* raises more critical questions and raises them more sharply than the book to which this *Foreword* is written.

Besides his scholarly and bibliographic contributions, one must mention his administrative contribution to Sanskrit-related institutions in Pune and elsewhere. As I already mentioned, he was the honorary secretary of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute from 1939 to 1994, a span of 55 years. While serving in this capacity, he did bring stability, prestige, and able administration to this premier institution. One can now observe in retrospect that such a long tenure of Dandekar had its inevitable consequences. It effectively delayed the emergence of a new leadership and the change that such institutions required to keep up with modernization. During one of my long stays at the Bhandarkar Institute in the early 90s, I remember talking to Professor Dandekar extensively about the necessity of adding computer equipment and expertise to the Institute’s facilities. He and several of his colleagues came to my room in the guesthouse of the Institute and inspected my computer. However, it was rather too difficult for him at his stage in life to fully comprehend the potential of



this new technology, and it took several more years for a computer to be installed at the Institute.<sup>3</sup> His towering personality made it rather awkward for his colleagues to express their differences of opinion on academic and administrative matters. The meetings of the various boards and committees at the Bhandarkar Institute were for decades a mere show of hands in support of Dandekar's proposals without any further discussion or dissent. His theories about the Veda were rarely subjected to a critical review by his colleagues. On the other hand, one must recognize that without his leadership and administrative and political acumen, many institutions that he headed may not have done as well as they did under some difficult circumstances. His prestige and influence with the Government of India and the Government of the State of Maharashtra indeed made it relatively easier for research grants to continue to flow to institutions of Sanskrit learning in Pune and elsewhere. This includes major projects like the Sanskrit Dictionary project at the Deccan College. I have noticed that the volume *Sanskrit and Maharashtra: A Symposium* that Dandekar edited in 1972 completely leaves out the cultural and political strains involved in the relations between Sanskrit and Marathi in the past and the present. This was perhaps due to a practical consideration on the part of Dandekar and his colleagues at Pune. Discussing these strains out in the open may perhaps have harmed rather than helped the continuing support from the state government of Maharashtra, which was not always sympathetic to the cause of Sanskrit learning. It is understandable if such considerations often limited the extent to which Dandekar and his colleagues in Pune could give a full expression to their personal opinions on sensitive matters.

I would also like to mention his role in disseminating the new critical learning to the local Marathi audiences in Pune and elsewhere. His bibliography includes a fair number of his Marathi articles and radio-addresses on topics like the Harappan Civilization, his life in Germany, critique of the German Nazi propaganda machine, invasions by the Greeks and Persians, his evolutionary Vedic mythology, the original home of the Aryans, history of Hinduism, and contributions of various Indian and European scholars to Sanskrit studies. Through these Marathi publications and addresses, Dandekar was hoping to direct his local audiences to recognize the difference between populist ideas and critical scholarship.

Apart from his scholarship and administrative accomplishments, Dandekar was at his heart a Hindu, though not a traditionalist. Proud to mention in class that he belonged to the Vāsiṣṭha gotra, he was himself

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<sup>3</sup> I am happy to report that recently the Institute has been able to produce and distribute the text of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* and Dandekar's *Vedic Bibliography* on a computer CD format before Dandekar passed away.

an illustration of the Vedic description: *ádabda-vrata-pramatir vásiṣṭhaḥ* (RV 2.9.1). In his political philosophy, he was more of a Gandhian, but modernist in his overall approach. While some of his historical opinions about Veda and Hinduism may appear shocking to a traditional Hindu, Dandekar was not afraid of expressing them in the hope of bringing about a better world, though he was not an active social reformer. However, very much in the footsteps of R.G. Bhandarkar, Dandekar wanted to see the emergence of a reformed modern Hinduism that would serve the needs of a modernizing India. The concluding paragraph of his article 'Hinduism: Retrospect and Prospect' (*Insights into Hinduism*, pp. 45–46) expresses his dream for the future of Hinduism in a modern world:

Today, India, like the rest of the civilized world, is witnessing a major conflict of values. . . . It is clear that the kind of equilibrium which traditional Hinduism had established has now been seriously disturbed by modernisation. But it is equally clear that, for the sake of social solidarity, a new kind of equilibrium must be substituted, and that Hinduism . . . does possess the capacity to meet this challenging situation in quite an adequate manner. . . . The secularism which is now accepted by the Indian people as an article of faith, does not imply irreligion or anti-transcendentalism or non-spirituality. . . . Secularism, which seeks to subordinate the theologic, credal, institutional, ritualistic aspect of religion to its mystic, personal, spiritual aspect, does not contemplate an outright reversal of the spiritual tradition of the country. It rather promotes a healthy evolution of that tradition so that it may suitably respond to the changing conditions. History would show that Hinduism could not have anything intrinsically against such secularism.

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*University of Michigan*

MADHAV M. DESHPANDE

