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## **Gaspare Gorresio: The prolific Italian scholar who pioneered major Indological studies in the West with his translation of the Indian Epic "Ramayana"**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to illuminate the significant contributions of the eminent Italian scholar Gaspare Gorresio (18.1.1807-21.5.1891) to Sanskrit and Indological studies. During the colonial era, many foreign scholars advanced classical Indological studies by translating key texts of ancient Indian scriptures and civilization. However, Gorresio stood out as a pioneer in this field, making substantial and comprehensive contributions to the critical study and translation of Indian scriptures after extensive efforts in collecting and collating various versions available in India. He not only mastered Sanskrit, the language of Indian scriptures, but also undertook the monumental task of translating the Indian epic "Ramayana," one of the greatest ancient epics in world literature, into Italian as "Rāmāyaṇa, poema indico di Valmiki." This mammoth text, comprising over 24,000 verses is divided into seven books or kandas, as detailed out in Valmiki Ramayana. In recognition of his contributions, the University of Turin established a chair for Sanskrit studies for the first time in 1852 and awarded it to Gorresio.

**Keywords:** Ramayana, Gorresio, Indology, Sanskrit, Indologists, Sanskrit studies, Indian scriptures, Indian epics

### **Introduction**

At the outset, it would be appropriate to give an excerpt from the 'Introduction' chapter of Gaspare Goressio's nineteenth century edition of the Indian Epic "Ramayana" showing his great admiration of this ancient Indian saga:

"Splendido e nobile monumento di vera epopen antic., pervenuto a noi dalla prisca eta de' poet teosofi e mitografi, s'avra quindi innanzi ad aggiun-gere ai poemi Omerici la grande epopea di Valmici, il Ramayanma"<sup>1</sup>

In English, it would generally read as below:

"Splendid and beautiful monument of true ancient epic came to us from the beginning age of theosophical poets and mythographers; we will therefore have to add (it) to the Homeric poems: the great epic of Valmici, the Ramayana."

Before giving an account of Gorresio's vast contribution to Indological studies, the words "Indology" and "Sanskrit" would need some elaboration. A short definition would enunciate "Indology" as the study of ancient Indian culture, traditions, literature, philosophy, and history. To explain further, it would also mean and include the study of ancient Indian languages and scripts, which include Brahmi, Pali, and Sanskrit, that would facilitate the reading and translations of ancient Indian historical texts and understanding of Indian customs, traditions, and spiritual beliefs. Sanskrit, an Indo-Aryan language, is believed to be a general language practiced in the Indian continent in ancient times, and it has been used in the scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

The discipline of Indology had remained generally eclipsed from Europe and the rest of the world till Gorresio's entry into this field. However, some scholars from various European countries, such as the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British scholars William Jones (1746-1794) and William Carey (1761-1834), made some efforts in this direction. But their works remained limited to the compilation of grammar or writings on Indian culture and religion. Also, this discipline was not taken up in a major way for editing or translations of Indian literature. Goressio (18.1.1807-21.5.1891) got the inspiration for comprehensively pursuing Indological studies from the undercurrents of cultural interchange taking place between Europe and India in the nineteenth century. It is undeniable that some credit for the enthusiasm towards Sanskrit and Indology in Italy goes to the University of Turin, where, in

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continuation of traditions of Near East studies, a chair for Sanskrit studies was established in 1852. Goressio was the first scholar to whom this prestigious chair was awarded.

He was attracted to the Indian Epic Ramayana, an Indian epic poem authored by the Indian Rishi Valmiki in ancient times, narrating the story of Prince Rama of Ayodhya and his wife Sita. It consists of over 24,000 verses divided into seven books or kandas, namely, Bal Kanda (Adi Kand), Ayodhya Kand, Aranya Kand, Kishkinda Kand, Sunder Kand, Yudh and Uttara Kand. It is considered to be one of the most-greatest ancient epics in world literature.

He can be considered to be the first scholar who, for the first time, made a concrete and comprehensive contribution to Indological studies by not only mastering the Sanskrit language, the language of Indian scriptures, but also for the first time took up the colossal task of translating the "Ramayana" as "Rāmāyaṇa, poema indico di Valmiki." This was a colossal work that appeared in 12 volumes over a long period of twenty-four years from 1843 onwards. That such an exhaustive work was carried out for the first time in Europe, adds to its stature. Starting the work in 1841, volumes 1-V were published till 1847. The actual Italian translation was published in 1847 as volume VI.

Another important dimension of this mammoth work is that Goressio had to work on two versions of the Ramayana available at that time. One of them was a version originating from North India, and another one was from Eastern India (Bengal), also referred to as the Gauda version. He went to the extent of a careful collation of two London and four Paris manuscripts and study of various commentaries on the Ramayana, including Lokānatha Cakravartin's Manohara and Ragunātha Vācaspati's Rāmāyaṇa Tilaka, as well as commentaries by Kullūkabhaṭṭa. Only after these profound analytical studies did he finally choose to go ahead with the Gauda version, as he found the same to be superior. Accordingly, the first five volumes he edited initially were based on the Gauda version.

The long Introduction in Volume I of Gorresio's series accurately elaborates on the changes in texts and styles that accrued over the ages in Ramayana. The in-depth analysis and scholarly valuation in the Introduction and the accuracy and authenticity of expressions in his translation got him immense critical acclaim.

Besides the above, he wrote several articles dealing with Indian chronology, Veda, ancient Indian literature, etc. Some of these works that depict his substantial contribution to Indological studies are as follows:

- Studies on India, in Il Subalpino (1840).
- The sources of the epic and the Uttarakanda, in Rivista Orientale, I (1867).
- Essays from the Uttarakanda, ibidem, IV (1868-69); V (1869-70).
- Uttarakanda, Italian version, Turin 1871.
- Works relating the Sanskrit manuscripts found in the public and private libraries of India, in Proceedings of the Turin Academy of Sciences, IX (1873-74).
- Unity of origin of the Indo-European peoples in Proceedings of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Turin, II (1866-67).

**Biblical:** I. Pizzi, GG, in Atti Accad. Turin, XLII (1906-1907), pp. 556-572; E. Windisch, Gesch. Der Sanskrit-Philologie und Indischen Altertums., in Grundriss der Indo-Arischen Phil., II, Berlin and Leipzig 1920, p. 145 f.

It is evident that the multi-volume translation of Ramayana and the other works by Goressio, as detailed in the above paragraphs, far exceeds the work done by other earlier scholars. In subsequent periods, the German scholars Max Mueller (1823-1900), Johann Georg Bühler (1837-1898), and the British scholar Ralph T.H. Griffith (1819-1899) also contributed significantly to the Indological studies by translating some Indian classics, but they entered the scene later. So, Gorresio (1808 -1890) can be considered to be the real pioneer of promoting Indological studies in Europe.

For the benefit of readers, a sample translation of one of Valmiki Ramayana's verses is given below to portray how Gorresio has brought out truthfully the essence of the Sanskrit verses and capturing its nuances.

### Valmiki Ramayana Bala Kanda (Adi Kanda)

#### Sanskrit

कोसलो नाम मुदितस्फीतो जनपदो महान् ।  
निविष्टस्सरयूतीरे प्रभूतधनधान्यवान् ॥1.5.5॥  
अयोध्या नाम नगरी तत्रासील्लोकविश्रुता ।  
मनुना मानवेन्द्रेण या पुरी निर्मिता स्वयम् ॥1.5.5॥

#### Gorresio's Italian Translation

Sulle sponde della Sarayii gj stende un' artipia  
beta e feconda terra che s' appelli dei Cosali  
pmgue d' armenti, di biade e d ogni allra ncchezza  
Quivi sorge una ciui per nome Ayodhya,  
famosa nel mondo, fondata ab antico da Manu2

#### General English translation

On the banks of the Sarayii spreads a wide.  
happy and fruitful land that calls itself of the Cosali.  
plenty of herds, fodder and all sorts of things.  
Here stands a place called Ayodhya.  
famous in the world, founded anciently by Man.

#### Conclusion

Gaspare Gorresio's translation of the Ramayana and his extensive Indological studies established him as a pioneer in the field. His mastery of Sanskrit and meticulous scholarship set a foundation for future scholars, earning him a chair in Sanskrit studies at the University of Turin. Gorresio's work significantly advanced the understanding and appreciation of ancient Indian literature and culture in Europe, leaving a lasting legacy in Indological scholarship.

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