

# In Berkley, Sanskrit comes of age

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As the Sanskrit program at the University of California, Berkeley enters its 101<sup>st</sup> year, Sanskrit and Indian studies professor Robert Goldman and his wife Sally Sutherland Goldman, a lecturer in Sanskrit at the school, will have a lot to celebrate.

For one thing, Sanskrit studies — which has about a dozen graduate and some 30 undergraduate students from a raft of programs ranging from religion to history — is among the most popular in the Western world. And while many fabled universities in Europe have curtailed their Sanskrit program, the language is celebrated at Berkeley year after year with enthusiasm.

“But of course, things could be far better,” says Robert Goldman, who chairs Berkeley’s Center for South Asia Studies. “The enrollment could be more. There could be better understanding of the importance of the classics, and the fact that you cannot really understand the ancient world, at least much of it, without understanding Sanskrit literature.”

The Goldmans have also been working for nearly 25 years on a massive Princeton University Press project to produce a new translation of Tulsidasa’s *Ramayana* with

copious notes. The sixth volume of the ancient epic are out, and the couple is overseeing the production of the seventh. The volumes are also part of the Clay Sanskrit Library, published in conjunction with New York University Press, but without the notes found in the Princeton edition.

It is a pity that some Americans will question the relevance of the project, Robert Goldman says with a sigh, adding that the growing Indian-American communities across the country could help make the translations widely known not only to fellow Indians but also to their non-Indian friends.

“The *Ramayana* means an extraordinarily great deal to many millions of people,” he says. “In an age of ever-increasing globalization, and at a time when large numbers of people from South and Southeast Asia have become an integral part of America, most of us know so little about a work that has so dramatically shaped the culture and society of a region ranging from Afghanistan to Bali in Indonesia.”

While Goethe’s *Faust* stands with the classics as pillars in the canon of great Western literature, Goldman asserts that an entirely different epic poem of arguably greater impact remains largely ignored by

scholars in the West.

“We know though that its influence over the millennia rivals that of the *Bible* and its length is four times that of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined,” he adds.

The *Ramayana* project would not have taken off in a less intellectually stimulating climate than at Berkeley.

Though Sanskrit was taught at Berkeley beginning 1897; it was in 1906 that the first professorship in Sanskrit was created when celebrated scholar and translator, Arthur Ryder joined the Berkeley faculty. South Asia related programs were gradually expanded in succeeding decades, but began in earnest in 1940 when Murray Branson Emeneau came to Berkeley. He taught and conducted research in Sanskrit and Dravidian linguistics, and Indian ethnography and folklore. He was joined after the war by the distinguished anthropologist David Mandelbaum.

Goldman says the *Ramayana* project is the first to translate the critically edited text that scholars at the Oriental Institute at the University of Baroda, prepared from 1960 to 1975.

“But it is much more than a line-for-line translation,” Goldman adds.

“There is also a thorough critical analysis

of the epic. Several of the centuries-old commentaries that we have studied have never before been published, and we offer this discussion to readers with annotations.”

To many Berkeley students in the Sanskrit or other departments, the new translations could nudge others towards greater awareness of Sanskrit lore.

“What we have provided, and what no other translation has ever provided, is a very detailed, dense annotation of every line in the text,” says Goldman. “These notes are based in part on this rich tradition of Sanskrit commentary, which provides us with a window into how this text was read, understood, and argued over for centuries by traditional Sanskrit scholars.”

A basic knowledge of the poem is also essential for understanding modern India, its politics, religion, history, and popular culture. And how the epic is exploited by the political parties to further their agenda. Until Goldman began the translation project, however, the poem was out of reach to most scholarly communities outside Asia.

“We have also signed a deal with a publisher in New Delhi to produce a rather inexpensive version in India in a few months,” Goldman adds.