Indian Religions in Scientific Works by Mircea Eliade

Liliya Nazimovna Akhsanova
Lecturer

Rimma Nailevna Sabirova
Senior lecturer
The Institute of Foreign Relations, History and Oriental Studies
Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Russia
E-mail: nrimman@yandex.ru, ahlina@mail.ru
Contact: +79033874358, +79272482504
Address: 18, Kremliovskaya Str., Kazan Federal University, Kazan, 420008, Russian Federation

Abstract

The relevance of the problem under investigation is determined by the need of studying the culture of India in the context of works by the outstanding scientist, historian of religion Mircea Eliade, as well as by an increasing interest in India and its spiritual traditions on the whole. Cultural-mythological symbolism and spiritual and religious component of India are the aspects investigated by M. Eliade. The diversity of Indian religions and beliefs form the foundation of this country, quite peacefully coexist even by influencing and complementing each other. The article aims at revealing the impact of the works by Mircea Eliade on the development of oriental studies and in particular the study of Indian culture of the twentieth century. The leading approach to the study of this problem is comparative analysis which enabled to give proof of the fact that M. Eliade made a great contribution to the popularization of India, Indian yoga, philosophy and religion. The main stages of scientific activity of the scholar have been exposed and those works which in our opinion help to solve the problem to the fullest extent have been analyzed. The main results of the study give the validity to the hypothesis that the works by M. Eliade on the development of exploring the East are important. The materials of the article may be useful for the studies of the Orient and the history of religions.

Keywords: yoga, the sacral, mythology, coincidence of opposites, Indian religion.
Introduction

The integrated study of India has attracted foreign and Russian scholars for many decades [1,2,3,4,5,6]. It is India that has become the second largest country after its Rumania, which exerted an enormous influence on the creative and scientific activity of the famous writer, philosopher and historian of religions Mircea Eliade [7,8,9]. They both were so equally important for him that all life in his work and research activities Eliade tries to “combine”, find common roots. Even in search for community he goes further studying religions and beliefs in Australia, Oceania, European countries, the peoples of Russia (even studies the Russian language). It was important for him to notice and explain the relationship of religions, cultures and history: “But a historian of religions in the strict sense can never give up the interest in historical concrete. The highest credit of any historian of religions is just an attempt to uncover an existential situation in the “fact”, having caused it, that is properly determined by the historical moment and cultural style of the century “[10: 462-463]. Living in India, studying at the University of Calcutta, led by Professor Surendranath Dasgupta, Mircea Eliade was exploring the country not only in the classroom walls, but also the lives of local people: he visited holy places, feasts, even wore traditional clothing (Bengal dhoti) “It was the solidarity with culture, which I would like to commune with” [11: 162]. He came to this country as a student to study and understand it, not to measure the “Western standards” and understand the intricate of culture and show the West that India can be cognized in a different way. India formed M. Eliade as a scientist and a writer, and a person. You will hardly find a scientist as Eliade to live so long in India. The aim of this study is to identify the sources of interest in oriental studies and analysis of Eliade’s representations of India.

TERMS, MATERIALS And METHODS

The methodological basis of the study is a systematic multidisciplinary approach that enables to use theoretical propositions of classical and modern oriental studies and other sciences (philosophy, history, psychology, religious studies, and others). Biographical approach allowed us to study the scientist’s life in the context of his research activities. Of great importance is the comparative analysis of few critical literature of Eliade’s scientific works. The application of textual analysis has revealed the features of the structure and analysis of M. Eliade’s works. Phenomenological approach will enable us to express our own vision and objectively assess M. Eliade’s scientific achievements in studying religions of India. The main sources of this study are “Yoga: Immortality and Freedom”, a collection of essays “Asian Alchemy” and the two-volume edition “Treatise on the History of Religions”. The choice of these texts is based on the fact that, in our opinion one can judge more fully by them the scientist’s perception of India as a special spiritual dimension.

Results And Discussion

Eliade took an interest in oriental studies in his youth. While in lyceum, he discovered the “Italian orientalists and specialists in religious studies: Pettazzoni, Buonayuti, Tucci and others” [11: 156] and even wrote articles on the subjects that were brought up in their books. In search of the means to express his “Franco-Slavic-Roman and simultaneously protohistorical and Eastern" spiritual heritage Eliade considered it necessary to study the archaic and non-European cultures [11: 157]. Later in college, he began to expand his knowledge: he studied the Hebrew and Persian languages, the history of religions and mythology, but most of all, ancient and modern East, explaining that “it is impossible to understand the meaning of human life, and especially his position in the universe, if not to refer to the archaic phases of religious experience “, and he unable to find it in his own religious tradition [11, 12].
Unfettered childhood and freedom-loving character helped him feel as one who belongs to Indian community, which gave him the incidental advantages of learning the Indian culture. There he tried to use his entire Western mental furniture of his mind in studying the Indian culture: “I have never refused Western practices of cognition in order the benchmarks of a Western scholar to be combined with the benchmarks from within a tradition” [11: 162-163]. Being raised on classical German philosophy, he became nevertheless familiar with the “exotic” Indian philosophy and willingly responded to the contemporary trends of European culture. It was his dream to unite opposites – coincidentia oppositorum, a concept that will be a key in virtually in all his scientific works. It should be noted his foresight as a scientist, he did not take the paved way but studied not only the texts of the Vedas and Upanishadas to be well-known in the West, more attention was drawn to the yoga sutras and tantric texts. M. Eliade held education under Professor S. Dasgupta. He gave the young man ideal conditions to study and even invited to live in his house. Eliade had to leave Calcutta because of his being at variance with the teacher, he went to the Himalayas, where he was living for several months in Swami Sivananda. Here, trying to “discover dimension of Indian spirituality seemed to be unnoticed” [11: 166] He tried to practice the psycho-physical techniques about which he read in Calcutta. It can be assumed that these yogic practices have left the most vivid impressions and served as the basis for his further theoretical studies. According to the scientist, he was not able to understand India from books and, therefore, decided to go there, where Eliade distinguished himself as a practitioner. Eliade himself admitted that it was India that had formed him, taught three lessons. First, the discovery of certain sacramental art with which one can transfigure life. Second, the importance of religious symbolism in traditional cultures. And third – he was shocked at the “discovery of a neolithic man” [3, 11: 171], he “saw” the very ancient roots that unite the cultures of India and Eastern Europe. It is enough to understand the meaning of the study of Indian culture. Eliade carried out not only a comparative analysis of the question under investigation, there took place self-cultivation, self-knowledge.

In 1969 A. L. Basham claimed that yoga secrets had not been revealed yet. It is safe to say that already in 1933 Eliade revealed many secrets of yoga, after he had brilliantly defended his thesis, which was later published in a monograph “Yoga. An Essay on the Origins of the Indian Mysticism “. After having enlarged and revised it, Eliade had his book edited which, later on, became a classic work in matters of yoga study, which appeared to be as a holistic and universal spiritual world. The scholar distinguishes yoga between “classical” and “popular”. He understands yoga as a religious-philosophical tradition and soteriological psychotechnics being characterized by initiatory structure and the ability to reach the control of subconsciousness. It is important to note that Eliade notes the principle of coincidentia oppositorum in the very term of yoga: from the point of view of etymology, the word “yoga” means “restraint”, “union”, “bond”, and at the same time, the main idea of yoga is an opportunity to gain emancipation from suffering. One can also trace the contrasting of the Western consciousness with the Eastern consciousness in the following areas: suffering from sin - suffering from ignorance (avidya) [1:74], the salvation of the individual, the loss of the individual’s life for the sake of salvation. It is important for Eliade as for the historian of religions to explore all history of yoga, starting with the “aboriginal” India to its contemporary state, and simultaneously he tries to find the roots of Hinduism. He stressed that yoga in all its diversity (religious, mystical, erotic and magic) had a huge impact on the development of Indian literature and the formation of the spirit of modern India in general [11,12].

Analyzing Eliade’s works, one can understand that Buddhism and yoga have a lot in common. Firstly, the main problem of Buddhism is conscious suffering, that is explained by divine will and salvation from it. Like yoga, Buddhism is an initiatory teaching. A man who has reached nirvana is like a man who has been liberated while living (jivanmukta [1: 149]), and to sink into nirvana, Buddhism uses yogic psychotechnics complementing them with a persistent desire to...
perceive the truth [13,14,15]. The objective of yoga and Buddhism is to master time. Salvation is found through “dying” in this world and in the revival in a preterhuman existence, which is beyond any description or definition.

The triumph of yoga, according to M. Eliade, occurred during the formation of Hindu, the cause of origin of which, he considers, is the need for a more specific, personal, living religious experience, in more accessible forms of worship. “Mahabharata”, the sample of didactic literature, appeals to all social circles, Eliade finds confirmation of full hinduization of yogic practices. What is yoga to appear through the prism of Hindu and its main text “Bhagavad Gita”? Inclusion of yoga into Vaishnavism “is indicative of the victory of this yogic tradition” [15: 174]. There Eliade understands yoga as a spiritual discipline, the purpose of which is the union of human and divine souls, this is timeless wisdom that is revealed at the right moment in history. If yoga appears to be as a mystical philosophy accessible to the select few, in “Bhagavad Gita” yoga gives hope for the salvation to any mortal, yoga as a tool that helps not to become attached to this world. Eliade could not help but notice the similarities of Hinduism and Buddhism. For example, the awareness and knowledge of the truth comes by experience or by the action, as well as an act of compassion, sympathy, empathy – one accepts another's pain or joy like his own.

In India there are no “superior” or “inferior” religions, all have the right to exist and be respected. Religion permeates all spheres of human life. Perhaps it is there Eliade saw his ideal man - a religious man (homoreligiousus). “The Sanskrit word dharma derived from the Indo-European root dhar with a meaning of “support” corresponds to western concept of religion “[4: 9]. It is what is supported by the whole world. We can assume that searching for the fundamental principle of all religions begins from here. An interest in mythology intrinsic in childhood has been developed in India in a new way. Since Hinduism is a mythological religion for the most part, myths have not been left somewhere in ancient times, Indians live these myths and rituals associated with them. And M. Eliade being to India of course saw it all, his works on mythology are indicative of it. The ongoing dialogue between East and West can also be traced in his books and essays on myths (“The Myth of the Reunion”, “The Myth of the Eternal Return”, “Myths, Dreams and Mysteries”, “Aspects of the Myth” and others.). Breadth of views of the scholar gives an opportunity to correlate the two views of the world and reveal the universal laws. For example, Eliade pays special attention to the symbols, images and rituals associated with the perception of time in different mythological, religious and philosophical systems, as the perception of time discriminates between ancient man and modern man. He claims that the transition from one form of time perception to another one is due to the changes in religious consciousness. Comparing the Indian yoga, ancient eon, Hebrew olam, Eliade traces the cyclic recurrence of time perception by mythological peoples. “Myth will save from fear” [10: 19], it helps to feel the proximity of the gods, feel oneself a part of nature, the whole universe.

The originality and novelty of the works by Mircea Eliade is that he appears in his writings to be a multiple scientist, although university professors chide him for this, arguing that it is impossible to be a scientist, teacher, and writer at the same time. But throughout his life he proved the contrary, without separating it from what he was doing in his life and sometimes it was his knowledge that helped him to understand and solve the problem. For example, being encompassed with doubts whether to get married to Nina Mares, it suddenly dawned upon him: “It’s like striking of lightning - I have realized: Maya has instigated me to terrible words, it is her latest diabolical attempt to kill me. And I have realized that none of that will distress Nina ...” [12: 222]. Maya is “a cosmic illusion that a man blinded with ignorance (avidya) suffers (and even worse - takes as the reality)” [15: 54].

Initially, the main task of comparative philosophy was to differentiate between Western and other philosophies and, as a consequence, the proof of the superiority of the West. Eliade as a
comparativist and phenomenologist of religions and attached much importance to the views of the adherents of various religions. He attempted to undertake studies avoiding general values and prejudices. In our opinion, Mircea Eliade is not a dried-up scientist who compares, contrasts, criticizes and draws conclusions, but a philosopher, being perhaps subjective, inaccurate somewhere but convincing, who gives arguments with which one cannot help agreeing. When in 1957 he took the lead of the Department of the History of Religions, University of Chicago, there were only three such departments in the United States, but after nearly twenty years they were about thirty. M. Eliade made a considerable contribution to it. Despite the vast geographical coverage of research material, he uses most often the concepts and quotations of Indian religious and philosophical texts to explain, clarify some points. As a phenomenologist, Mircea Eliade could not take a neutral position towards philosophical and religious beliefs of India in a positive sense. He paid particular attention to them, and the fact that he superexalted would not be a bit of exaggeration.

The problem touched upon in this study was partially considered by N. L. Sukhachev [14], N. Ya. Daragan [13] in the preface to the selected works by M. Eliade. Myths by Eliade are not a kind of cultural-historical concept or certain aesthetic credo, but a kind of ethical teachings [Sukhachev, 1998]. Also, the critics of scholarly works by Eliade note that the style of his works is not scientific at all. Earlier critical articles on the works by Eliade are increasingly critical and only at the turn of XX - XXI centuries the articles are already analytical which recognize his significance and place in science. According to N. Ya. Daragan, one can feel an immersion in the subject in Eliade’s books, which, however, weakens the analytical focus of the researcher, as Eliade’s investigations were in tune with the spirit of the time, they satisfied the interest of the public at large. The study of toponomy of myth and mythology in literature of the twentieth century is a valuable tendency in the creative activity by Eliade [13]. S. V. Pakhomov characterized M. Eliade as a master of comparative studies who, having taste in the synthetic scope of the subject, was able to note that Patanjali Yoga was not the only or even the decisive spiritual discipline among the multitude of other disciplines. The ability to consider the matter from all its bearings, evaluate its significance in different cultural and historical contexts, find out similarities and differences between the various forms of yoga and its place in this or any other spiritual complex is credited to Eliade [15].

Conclusion

At that time, when Mircea Eliade pursued his studies of Indian religious and philosophical system, in the West there prevailed the Eurocentric approach, the so-called eastern way of thinking was opposed to western mindset. The scholar made a great contribution to the popularization of India, the Indian yoga, philosophy and religion. His works are unjustly unappreciated, perhaps because his contemporaries could not properly understand his scientific vision and innovative ideas. The topics and issues raised by Eliade has only recently begun to attract the attention of Russian scientists. Not all the works of the scholar have been translated into Russian.

Notwithstanding some gaps and omissions in the investigations by Mircea Eliade, according to critics, it does not detract from the merits of his works on issues of Indian culture studies. Previously his works were not regarded as academic, but now his contribution to the development of science is supported not only by foreign but also Russian scientists. Actual continuity and significance of his scientific achievements rank him with such scholars as H. Zimmer, M. Muller, S. Radhakrishnan, and others. It cannot go unmentioned that it is India and its spiritual traditions in the writings by Mircea Eliade that are a unique set of standards with which the other social and religious systems are compared. He professes it, [13] India for Mircea Eliade is particularly a source of spiritual knowledge and practices that affords an opportunity to go beyond history and time; the country aspiring for freedom and liberation; the country in which the myths and mysticism are a
part of life for all people. The material of the article is of special interest to professionals involved in teaching and oriental studies, exploring the history of religion and philosophy.

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References