

DEVADATTIYAM

Johannes Bronkhorst Felicitation Volume

5

WORLDS OF SOUTH
AND INNER ASIA
WELTEN SÜD- UND
ZENTRALASIENS
MONDES DE L'ASIE
DU SUD ET DE
L'ASIE CENTRALE

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Johannes Bronkhorst and Indian Studies*

Intellectual courage. Independent thinking. Those who, like me, have had the privilege to have him as research guide or teacher and those who still have that privilege will know very well that these are characteristics par excellence of Johannes Bronkhorst. Two characteristics which are also evident from his numerous research publications which, in addition, show a wide research interest that covers the domains of Indian philosophy, Sanskrit grammar, Buddhology and Vedic studies.¹ We see courage to throw oneself into the most difficult problems in these domains, such as: Pāṇinian grammar and its relation with Vedic texts; the history of Buddhist thought starting in early Abhidharma texts; underlying presuppositions in early classical philosophical systems including the philosophy of grammar; the chronological relationship between *Upaniṣads* mutually and with Buddhism. We see independent thinking that gives argued defence of standpoints that deviate from or are opposite to established consensus. Established consensus and widespread scholarly opinions are never adhered to on the basis of authoritative names in either the western or the Indian tradition but they are either accepted or rejected on the basis of rigorous arguments that start from direct textual evidence.

Johannes was born on 17th July 1946 in Schiedam into a family of two brothers and a sister all born before WW II. His younger brother was born almost two years later. His father was a chemical engineer and

- * I thank Ruud Bronkhorst and Joy Manné for suggestions for improvement and especially for additional information on Johannes' young years and on the beginnings of Johannes Bronkhorst's scholarly career, and the editors of this volume for additional information on recent years of his work in Lausanne.
- 1 From the beginning of his scholarly career, these specific indological and buddhological domains have a broader background in Johannes' interest in psychoanalysis, brain science, religious studies, and human nature, for which see now his *Absorption: Two Studies on Human Nature* (BRONKHORST 2010). In June 2011, he has organised an interdisciplinary conference in Lausanne with the title "Why are humans religious?".

member of the church council of Protestant denomination (“vrijgemaakt gereformeerd”). Every Sunday the family went to church twice. Johannes’ paternal uncle, physicist by profession, was an atheist. At a young age Johannes was thus exposed to Protestant Christian belief and instruction and also to the rational questioning of Christian doctrines by his uncle. Johannes’s secondary education took place at the Groen van Prinstererlyceum in the neighbouring city Vlaardingen between 1958–1964. There he followed the gymnasium *bèta* programme (grammar school with mathematics and physics), which in the Dutch educational system is the best preparation for a university study in any field. Johannes began his studies of Mathematics and Physics at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. After passing the *kandidaatsexamen*,² he and a friend decided to make a great journey: from West-Africa to India. After arriving in India they secured places at the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur in order to study Sanskrit. Johannes had heard earlier that in India traditional scholars use and speak an ancient classical language, Sanskrit, and he wanted to see this for himself. Because of illness his friend soon had to go back to the Netherlands where he resumed his previous study, Geology. Johannes stayed and threw himself with much enthusiasm into the study of Sanskrit. Unlike his Indian fellow students who had studied Sanskrit and its literature throughout their earlier schooling, Johannes had to start from scratch.

Soon he learned of the existence of an internationally renowned Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit at Pune (then still spelled Poona). He applied to become student there but was refused admission. It was 1971, and there was much tension within Pakistan (at that time still consisting of a western and an eastern part) and between Pakistan and India. When the Indo-Pakistani war broke out in early December 1971, people in general and foreigners in particular were advised to leave cities in risk zones. This included Jaipur. Johannes decided to go to Goa and stay there till the situation in Jaipur would become more favourable.

2 In the Dutch system of university education at that time, the *kandidaatsexamen* was an important advanced exam which followed the first three years of a five or six year programme. This exam and the corresponding title of *kandidaat* disappeared towards the end of the 1980s.

When Johannes arrived at the train station,³ all the trains were full, but one friendly ticket conductor let him onto the train. The ticket conductor and Johannes agreed as follows. The ticket conductor would check if there was a seat. If there wasn't, Johannes would leave at the next stop. A while after the train had left, this ticket conductor came to tell Johannes that, unfortunately, there was indeed no place for him. Therefore, he had to leave the train at the next station, which turned out to be... Pune. Johannes got off and decided to have a look at that famous Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit, for which he had been unable to get admission. He met the head of the center, Prof. R. N. Dandekar, explained to him how he arrived in Pune and mentioned, *en passant*, that his earlier application to become student at the Centre in Pune had been rejected. Professor Dandekar immediately picked up the phone, made a call, and informed Johannes that he had now been accepted.

Besides attending the classes of the M.A. programme of the Centre, Johannes was much in contact with traditional Sanskrit scholars, pandits, with whom he studied Sanskrit texts beyond those belonging to the prescribed University programme. Every day he went to such a traditional scholar to read and analyze ancient texts for a few hours. To prepare for his classes and reading sessions with pandits, he would get up at five o'clock in the morning to study, sitting on the floor with his books and manuscripts on a lectern. In some of his later books he mentions Pandit Shivarama Krishna Shastri and Professor K. V. Abhyankar as traditional scholars who were most important for him. For a while, he also studied with Muni Jambuvijayaji, a Jain monk and world famous scholar, and wandered with him from village to village.⁴

- 3 This anecdote is confirmed from various sources. However, it is not immediately clear which train station was involved. In the 1970s a trip from Jaipur to Goa would normally start with taking a bus from Jaipur to Delhi, next a train from Delhi to Bombay, and finally a train (or bus) from Bombay to Goa. A train trip from Bombay to Goa could have a stop in Pune and would probably require a further change of trains and even of rails from broad to metre gauge. Johannes might therefore have met his fateful ticket conductor at the second part of his trip in Bombay.
- 4 From Johannes I heard the following anecdote about this period. Muni Jambuvijayaji once suggested that Johannes should become a monk in his tradition. Johannes did not quite know how to refuse politely. He made the excuse that he did not want to pull his hair out. At that time he wore his hair long. "It's not that bad," the Muni said and before Johannes knew what was happening he reached over and pulled out a handful of hair. Johannes was not persuaded!