

OBITUARY

CAMILLE BULCKE, S. J.

1909–1982

With the death of Fr. Bulcke on the 17th August 1982, the Hindi literary world suffered the loss of an outstanding authority on the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, an eminent lexicographer and dedicated promotor of Hindi. In these three fields of activity he made an important contribution to the promotion of Indian culture in the span of the 32 years he devoted to its cause. Christians too have cause to grieve over his death. He made for them an excellent Hindi translation of the New Testament. Its quality prompted the Hierarchy of North India to request him to translate the Old Testament into Hindi as well. He had some hundred pages left to do when death took him away.

He came to India as a young Jesuit of 26 at the end of 1935. There have been two important turning points in his life. At the age of 20, whilst preparing his B.Sc. in civil engineering at Louvain University, he suddenly felt the call to religious life. His examination over, he joined the Jesuit Order in 1930 with the intention of becoming a missionary in India. Within the five years he spent in Belgium and Holland in the pursuance of his religious formation and studies he learned Latin, Greek and German, the last to perfection. He already knew French and Flemish, his mother tongue.

On arrival in India, he immediately set himself to master Hindi. This was a second turning point. All over northern India Hindi was the current language, yet incongruously enough the medium of instruction in schools was largely English. As a university student he had been actively engaged in fighting for the right of his mother tongue to obtain parity with French in the university. In colonial India, his decision to master Hindi was therefore in character. It can counter to the then prevailing ambiance, but he quietly pursued his goal with his characteristic will-power and thoroughness.

He studied Hindi and Sanskrit privately, until after his theological studies he entered Calcutta University to obtain his B.A. in Sanskrit. Two years later, he went to Allahabad University for his M.A. in Hindi, and two years after that obtained his D.Ph. with his thesis, written in Hindi, entitled *Rāmkaṭhā kā Vikās* (The Development of the Rām Epic). This masterly work established him at once as the most distinguished authority on this popular epic.

He had already published during his theological study *The Saviour* – a harmony of the 4 Gospels, which he later translated into Hindi. For his M.A. in theology he

had written a long dissertation on *The Theism of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* which he published in 1947. In 1955, he published a *Technical English-Hindi Glossary of General Culture* which ran into 2 editions and whose success emboldened him to make a complete English-Hindi Dictionary (*Angrejī-Hindī Kos*) that took him 5 years in the making and appeared in 1968. This dictionary is the best on the market so far, and is highly praised for the discerning choice of its Hindi renderings. Then came the translation of the complete New Testament (*Nyū Teṣṭāment*), in 1977, after which he started on his translation of the Old Testament.

Naturally enough, his vast scholarship and love of Hindi brought him into contact with all the literary men and women of North India. His great erudition in Sanskrit and Hindi literature attracted many students whom he guided in their research. He was made a member of half a dozen state and national cultural associations and committees. Tulsīdās, whom Grierson called “the most important figure in the whole of Indian literature”, was his favourite poet. Every year on the occasion of Tulsīdās’s birthday celebration he was called upon from all quarters to discourse on that poet. These countless addresses spread his fame among thousands.

The three lectures he gave for the Hindustani Academy of Allahabad were published in 1977 under the title *Rāmakathā and Tulsīdās*. The editors of the *Hindi Encyclopedia* asked him to contribute all relevant entries referring to Christianity. His last work, in collaboration with Dr. Dineshwar Prasad, was *Rāmcāritmānas Kaumudī*, a wide selection of extracts from Tulsī’s epic with commentary and brief descriptions of the events associated with them. He also translated L’Oiseau Bleu of Maeterlinck for the Bihar Hindi Academy under the title *Nīl Panchī*, and gave on special occasions some 50 radio talks in Ranchi or Delhi. He became an Indian citizen in 1951, and was honoured in 1974 with the Padma Bhushan, an Indian Government award for services rendered to the cause of Hindi.

All the while he built up a specialised Sanskrit and Hindi library of some 10,000 books, partly to keep abreast of all worthwhile works in his fields of interest, partly to help professors, students and D.Ph. researchers who could not possibly find the books they needed anywhere else.

His scholarship was happily enhanced by his human qualities of mind and heart. Endowed with keen intelligence and a remarkable memory, he also gave full play to his warm nature which made everyone consider him as a personal friend. His undoubted Indianness made him the Guru and Bābā, all in one, for hundreds who sought his guidance not only in literary matters but often also with regard to their personal problems. If his loss is irreparable, the impact of his scholarship and towering personality has secured him a niche in the cultural history of the Hindi language.