






**Argentine Women's Contribution to the Knowledge of India in Latin America**  
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# Argentine Women's Contribution to the Knowledge of India in Latin America

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## Abstract

Argentina has been interested in the Eastern cultures in general, and in India in particular, since the very beginning of the nation. Although often not taken into account, that interest, and its subsequent influence, does not begin in the 20th century but goes back to the first half of the 19th century. Argentine intellectuals were influenced by European Orientalism, but they developed their own approach towards the Eastern world, free from any colonialist influence. The first half of 20th century shows the strong influence of Indian culture in Argentine culture. The contribution of men in this process is well recognized, however women's fundamental contribution to spread knowledge of India's culture in Argentina has not received proper attention nor rightly emphasized. Half a dozen Argentine women, from Victoria Ocampo, born in 1890, to Adelina del Carril, Indra Devi, Myrta Barbie, and Ada Albrecht, still alive, have significantly contributed to understanding India not only in Argentina but also in all Latin America. In the current paper, this aspect will be discussed and an attempt will be made to present a proper trajectory of Argentine women's contribution to the dissemination of Indian Knowledge in Latin America.

**Keywords:** Adelina del Carril, Ada Albrecht, Argentine women, India , Indra Devi, Latin America, Victoria Ocampo,

## Introduction

Women's contribution to the knowledge of India's culture in Argentina has been fundamental throughout the history of Argentine culture. Nevertheless, it has not been widely recognized or rightly emphasized. There are half a dozen Argentine women who, in addition to the men's cultural activities and works of the men widely acknowledged (Canzobre, 2018), have made significant contributions to understanding India not only in Argentina but also in all Latin America. Victoria Ocampo is one of them. Anyone involved in researching the interaction between Latin America and India knows the anecdote of the meeting between the Argentine writer and cultural manager, Victoria Ocampo, and the Indian poet, musician and educator, Rabindranath Tagore in 1924 in Buenos Aires. But this event is just the tip of the iceberg of a silent job Latin American women did, and, in fact, keep doing, in order to achieve a better understanding of the Indian Classical Culture among the Spanish-speaking people.

Ocampo is usually associated with Rabindranath Tagore because she was the Indian poet's host during his unplanned stay in Argentina<sup>1</sup>. However:

"Mahatma Gandhi was as important as Tagore in Ocampo's life and literary work. In turn, through her publishing house and Sur magazine, Ocampo's literary activities contributed

significantly to spreading Gandhi's ideas in the Spanish-speaking world, furthering their reach and depth" (Canzobre, 2019)<sup>ii</sup>

Even nowadays, some of Ocampo's translations are the only ones available in Spanish, although they have been out of print for far too long. She also got to know Lanza del Vasto through his poetry and published his book on Vinoba Bhave's life, one of the few books about Gandhi's disciple ever translated into Spanish: Lanza del Vasto (1955), *Vinoba*. Buenos Aires: Sur.

This seemingly odd relationship between Tagore and Ocampo -about which so much and such good material has already been published<sup>iii</sup> - began in 1924 but, in fact, Ocampo had been in touch with Tagore's artistic and philosophical works for a decade, as she wrote in the book published for the centenary of Tagore's birthday (Ocampo, 1961). In this way, Ocampo's long-term work, and the way she embraced Indian ideas, radically changed the way Argentina thinks of India, and thus contributed to transforming completely the Argentine attitude towards the East. In fact, that attitude is still alive today and is one of the reasons that explain how Argentina and India have come to be what they are to each other. When in May 1953 the Peronist government imprisoned Victoria Ocampo, among all the voices crying aloud for her release around the globe was that of Pandit Nehru, Prime Minister of India. His intervention was decisive to twist the decision of General Perón at a particularly belligerent time of his government, and Ocampo was released. Nehru's demand serves as a clear example of how remarkably close these two far-off nations had become by that time.

One of the best outcomes of the Tagore–Ocampo relationship is *Sur* magazine, founded by Victoria Ocampo in 1931. It was not only a magazine; it was also a whole cultural project in which Ocampo developed her cultural and political views. In *Sur*, she promoted a sincere dialogue between cultures: Latin and North America, America and Europe, the West and the East, South and South. Paul Valéry, Albert Camus, Vladimir Nabokov, José Ortega y Gasset, Romain Rolland, Mahatma Gandhi; Jorge Luis Borges, Rabindranath Tagore, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, among others, all became regular contributors in the decades *Sur* was a shining star in America. In addition, the way Victoria Ocampo introduced these important characters coming from the East shows the new place Eastern Cultures and India were being given. She would be considered an equal among equals, a way that clearly showed she did not share the idea of the European cultural superiority that used to prevail among the Argentine elites decades before. In this sense, Victoria Ocampo and Tagore's influence were visionary in terms of the reality to come in the 21st century. Both Tagore's and Gandhi's ideas, even acknowledging their different way of facing the challenges of life, show the West the complete spectrum of what India is really like. This idea involves not just mystics unaware of what happens around, but wise people working hard to make their dreams come true while being endlessly patient, and a global vision of life as a whole and interdependent reality in which philosophy, science, and politics work all together towards a common goal: the welfare of humankind. The real face of India starts to be shown at that time. All the so-called *Sur* Generation would certainly promote this clear change in viewpoints.

In 1968, another important event that shows how the Indo-Argentine relationship had been growing over the last decades also takes place: Indira Gandhi's visit to Argentina. Among all her activities here, she presented Victoria Ocampo with an honorary doctorate from the Vishva Bharati University, which Tagore founded.

However, Ocampo was not the only woman who played a decisive role in the relationship between the two cultures. After her, and only referring to Argentina, Maria René Cura, Ocampo's personal secretary; Adelina Del Carril, close to the Ramakrishna Vedantic movement; Myrta Barbié, the main Latin American Indian classical dancer; Ada Albrecht, a teacher of traditional Indian Vedantic wisdom; Carmen Dragonetti, a Sanskrit and Pali translator, were also the main figures who led the way to the knowledge and practice of the values of the Indian traditional culture in Latin America.

### **Argentina's approach to Eastern cultures in the 19th century**

Since its foundation as an independent nation and culture, Argentina was interested in the Eastern cultures in general, and in India in particular. Although often not taken into account, that interest, and its subsequent influence, does not begin in the 20th century but go back to the first half of the 19th century. Argentina's history shows the picture of a culture that is always interested in what happens in the rest of the world although it has always been under certain and decisive influences.

The process by which Argentina's national identity was built has two main streams of influence: on the one hand, its own Native American tradition, and on the other, as important and actually, even more, the European tradition. This cosmopolitan identity was transmitted first by the political and economic conquerors in the 19th century, Spain and Great Britain, and then by the immigration flows coming primarily from Italy and Spain, and to a lesser extent, from Germany and Middle Eastern countries, mainly of Arabian and Jewish descendants, between 1870 and 1930. All this makes the Argentine identity a melting pot of cultures and races right from its very beginning, an identity clearly different from many other South American countries, such as Bolivia, Ecuador or Peru, where their native roots are the main figures of their national identity.

This is the classical explanation of the way the Argentine national identity has been built. Axel Gasquet assumes that the influence the East will have on the Argentine elite from the very birth of the nation cannot be ignored:

"Of the initial conceptual and ideological use of European Orientalism, inherited from the Enlightenment in the generation of 1837, which has served to establish the aesthetic of the Pampas as a basic topic of Argentine literature and also to define the contours of native barbarism through Eastern barbarian's statements, we see that there is a political, even social, concern for the East among the members of the 80's Generation" (Gasquet, 2015)

Argentina has one of the first records of Indian traditional scriptures being known in Latin America. In 1869 the journalist Lucio Vicente López, son of the historian Vicente Fidel López, publishes "La Revista de Buenos Aires" ("The Magazine of Buenos Aires") in two successive volumes, an extensive review of "The Ramayana" using the French and Italian versions that had just come out as source material, after being published in Europe.

Nevertheless, Argentina's lack of desire to conquer gives Argentine intellectuals the opportunity to not only move away from the biased European desire for closeness but also to start appreciating the East in a different way from the colonial countries. Thus, Gasquet rightly points out

"... from the very beginning, the South American orientalism played a self-reflective role: it looked for a support for the development of a new national political program or for the configuration of a local aesthetic in vague and exotic latitudes." (Gasquet, 2015)

The modernist Ibero-American literary movement led by Rubén Darío, with Leopoldo Lugones as its most important representative in Argentina, sets up a new stage of Eastern culture penetration, even if it is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the importance these writers give the East in their works allows it to gain growing importance in Argentine culture. However, in their works the East is superficially appraised, many times its assessment being limited to the mere exoticism that the impact of the Arabian Nights stories had on the literati. What also contributes to this belief is the generalization made of the entire East, and, in all aspects of culture, of the perceptions of the Muslim social structures that the Argentine generation gained while visiting the Arab countries.

This scenario witnesses the birth of the new century. In 1910, the Centenary of Argentina also shows the awakening of cultural eagerness. Both attest to the increasing interest in India, in particular, that which Argentina starts developing. The crisis starts after the First World War, which challenges the thus-far unquestionable values of Western culture, and stirs an existential craving for the search for new horizons in the Argentine intelligentsia. At that time, India would play a key role.

### **India and the East arrive in Argentina by the end of the 19th century**

The milestones listed below confirm this phenomenon: some of them are quoted out of Gasquet's work; the others are original identifications:

1. In 1896, Emilio Roqué publishes the first edition of the Bhagavad Gita in Argentina, the same year it was published in Spain translated by M. A. Alonso. This shows close to Europe was the development of Argentine culture at that time. There is even an anonymous translation from 1895 done by an unknown follower of the Argentine branch of the Theosophical Society.
2. In 1907, the young Danish Nicolas Kier buys Emilio Persico's bookstore and transforms it into the Theosophical Bookstore, where those fond of India can be exposed to the Orientalist literature of the time, mainly the esoteric kind. The bookstore becomes a meeting point for the elite interested in the East and Kier founds the publishing house that bears his name and that will be one of the main promoters of Orientalist literature in Argentina throughout the 20th century.
3. Works by Omar Khayán and Khalil Gibran as well as the oriental literary classics, especially from the Middle East, are made available to the public thanks to other publishers, like the popular Tor, Nosotros Magazine, and the Mercatali printer in the first quarter of the 20th century.
4. The formation of a circle of young intellectuals who will look for humanistic alternatives to the increasing progress of positivism is promoted at the University of La Plata by both Joaquín V. González, the well-known Argentine politician, also known for his theosophical interests and his affiliation to the Argentine Masonic Lodge where he held very important degrees. Along with him were Alejandro Korn, the philosopher, whose undisclosed

Buddhist affiliation remained unknown for a long time; Vicente Fatone, the famous Philosophy professor and one of the architects of the new appreciation of India that closely followed the Tagore-Ocampo meeting. Not less important was the writer Carlos Muzzio Sáenz Peña: the first one to make Tagore known to important Argentine audiences through the editions of *Poems* in 1915 (only one year after the first of Zenobia Camprubí's translations done in Spain, showing again Argentine intellectuals so close to Europeans), *Fruit Gathering* in 1917, and his celebrated edition of *The Gardener* in the Nobel collection in 1924, the same year when Peña met the poet in Buenos Aires.

5. The Theosophical Society, an 1875 global Philo-Hindu movement that quickly attracted and captured much of the Argentine intelligentsia as it had done with modernists Rubén Darío and Amado Nervo, opens its Argentine branch in Buenos Aires in 1893. Everybody, from Leopoldo Lugones to Alfredo Palacios, including Joaquín V. González and José Ingenieros among others, shows rising interest in enhancing their knowledge of India. The theosophical movement seeks to face the reigning monolithic rationality and European scientism with a mystical inquiry rationally formulated that easily vanishes before the lure of "Western esotericism" and its desire for the paranormal phenomenon, a parasite that accompanies the theosophical movement and, unfortunately, hinders metaphysical depth.
6. In 1909 the first Spanish translation of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, as translated from the English version by Swami Abhedananda of the Swami Ramakrishna Order of India, is published in Buenos Aires. By 1922, the translations of *Karma Yoga*, *Jnana Yoga* and *Raja Yoga* written by Swami Vivekananda have already been published.
7. In 1967, Jesuit Father Ismael Quiles, an Argentine philosopher involved in the knowledge and research of Eastern cultures, specialized in India, and a yoga practitioner himself, opens the School of Oriental Studies at the Salvador University (USAL) with the first, and still today the only degree course in Latin America devoted to this specialty. He also opened university training courses in yoga that since 2001 have turned into Associates degrees.

There are three important facts that should be taken into account to understand this relationship between Argentina and the Eastern cultural world: first, a friendly, deepening and sincere interest in Indian culture in Argentina; second, distrust and frustration with the Western myth of eternal progress severely questioned by the war and its aftermath. Lastly, a cursory knowledge of India's ancient philosophy and wisdom due to the remnants of the exotic oriental appreciation of the late 19th century together with superficial and phenomenal mass communication led by occultist circles used the generic name of Orientalism for everything exotic. It could refer both to the Supreme Philosophy of the Upanishads and the Vedanta and also to parapsychological investigations of so-called mediums, fakirs and seers, information that could be found in the libraries of these well-known figures as the publications were available in Kier's bookstore. Even today, the same situation may repeat itself at non-specialized stores in Buenos Aires.

### **Argentine women looking towards India**

Along with the prominent men, Argentine women also played a fundamental role in the knowledge of the culture, art and deep spirituality of India although, as usual, their work appears

overshadowed. In the new century, the country began to move away from the classic colonial orientalism with European roots, and at the same time, from the vision provided by Hispano-American modernism. In the field of practical spirituality, three women stand out with a deep vision, love for the spiritual heritage of India and inexhaustible capacity for work: Adelina del Carril, Ada Albrecht and Mataji Indra Devi.

During the first half of the 20th century, Adelina del Carril (1889-1967) appeared together with her husband, the well-known Argentine writer, Ricardo Güiraldes, whom she had married in 1913. Güiraldes's aura among the Argentine intelligentsia of the time overshadowed Adelina's work<sup>iv</sup>. They shared a strong passion for India (Güiraldes had been there in 1910 and got in touch with Indian masters, including Ramana Maharshi. According to some scholars, the guru was one of his inspirations for the master of his main work, the gaucho-style novel, *Don Segundo Sombra*<sup>v</sup>). After Güiraldes's death, Adelina travelled to India. While her husband was mainly involved with the theosophical teachings, so fashionable among the intellectuals of the time, Adelina went to Belur Math, headquarters of the Ramakrishna order, and got closer to the Vedanta movement developed there. In fact, she was the first translator of the Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna into Spanish, although she always refused to be mentioned as such.

While living in Bangalore, India, in November 1948, she was invited by a maharani to meet the very young, but already about to be famous, Satya Sai Baba. She was 59 and he 22. He called her "Mommy" and since then they kept in touch, being for sure the first Argentine disciple Sai Baba had in Argentina. In 1951, she returned to Argentina bringing with her a 14 years old child, Ramachandra Gowda she had met since he was four. She intended to adopt him, but could never finish all the legal paperwork. Gowda devoted his life to sharing his knowledge of Indian wisdom in Argentina, and to showing how deep Indian's influence on his "step" father's literary work was. Adelina settled down in Ramakrishna's Ashram in Buenos Aires of which she was president in 1957 but to which she was linked since its foundation in 1933. (Pareshananda, 1991). She passed away in her room at the very ashram in 1967.

In the second half of the 20th century, appears the tireless task of Ada Albrecht (1932 - ) through her education-centered legacy in the Hastinapura Foundation and its Publishing House. Born in Argentina in 1932, she was raised since her childhood close to the Bhagavad Gita by her father, a German theosophist who arrived in the country and settled in Corrientes, a state outside Buenos Aires. After moving to Buenos Aires, where she got her degree in Philosophy and Educational Sciences, she came to know Nilakhanta Sri Ram, at that time president of the Theosophical Society, on his trip to Buenos Aires in 1961. Recognizing in the young student a mature soul, he kept a close relationship with her in the years to come. Before passing away, he requested her to travel to India, where, to the surprise of everybody, he didn't give her theosophical education, but introduced her to three Vedantic monks in Dehradun. After having received the traditional Vedantic wisdom in India between 1973 and 1979, she poured it into the American continent from Argentina, with a different perspective from the almost exclusively Hindu-Philo movements. In 1981, she founded the Hastinapura Foundation, assisted by a group of disciples she had been teaching after her trips to India. There she developed an integral plan of spiritual education, focused not only on Indian wisdom but also on universal mystical teachings, emphasizing the values of spiritual universalism and nonviolence. From Argentina, the foundation spread to several other Latin-American countries, holding nowadays more than 30 branches. In 1982, Hastinapur

Publishing House began its editorial task, focusing mainly on the translation of traditional Indian texts. One of its main achievements has been to publish in Spanish Kisham Ganguly's classical edition, full-unabridged Mahabharat, in 12 volumes. In 2021, PM Narendra Modi highlighted Ada Albrecht's work at Maan Kee Bhat Radio Program.

Together with all these women, we cannot help but appreciate the work of the great promoter of yoga in Argentina, Mataji Indra Devi (1899-2002). Not without exaggeration, she was baptized as "the first lady of yoga" due to the level of popularity that she gave to this practice since she arrived in Argentina in 1985, and stayed there since she passed away at the age of 102. She was already a leading figure in the field of yoga before she arrived in South America: she had been a disciple of Tirumalai Krishnamacharya at the Mysore yoga shala, along with B.K.S. Iyengar, Pathabi Jois and Desikachar, and the first woman to teach Yoga in India, China, and Los Angeles, USA. Without betraying the classical spirit of yoga, she managed to get the practice available to almost everybody, through her charming presence and simple life.

Working from the field of teaching Indian spirituality to a non-specialized public, but interested in broadening their existential perspectives, the preaching of these three women influenced the impact of India on the Argentine social environment. Some aspects of its influence have been studied in academic circles, e.g. in psychology:

"In the field of oriental practices in our country, we can see the impact of personal figures whose spiritual searches and training associated with the reading of sacred texts, as well as visits and stays in India are shown as legitimizing facts of their knowledge. Each of these personalities designed a practice that, recognizing its Hindu roots, proposes a specific look at some of the axes that make up the discipline: for Devi, the emphasis is on improving the quality of vital energies, while for Albrecht it is the understanding of the universal divine and the need for re-union with the sacred" (Korman and Saizar, 2016).

Spirituality was not the only field in which Argentine women contributed to the deep knowledge of India during the 20th century. In the academic world remarkable contributions were made in the field of Indology, Buddhist Studies, Indian Philosophy and Buddhist Philosophy by Carmen Dragonetti, (1937-2018), along with his life partner Fernando Tola, (Rodríguez de la Vega, L. and Vofchuck, R., 2010): among them, his permanent and incessant task to successfully confront the prejudice of the non-existence of philosophy in India. Their extensive bibliographic production as translators of Sanskrit and Pali and the projection of their work as researchers at the National Council of Scientific Investigations (CONICET) and through the Institute of Buddhist Studies Foundation has left a living legacy in the young researchers trained under their direction.

If we turn our gaze to the cultivation of the classical arts of India, Myrta Barvié's career (1944? - 2020) stands out, as in the aforementioned cases, in the panorama of the Spanish-speaking world. In addition to the living legacy that she leaves behind in the two schools of classical dance founded by two of her disciples. Her book on Indian Classical Dances published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in 1996 and republished by the same institution in 2012, is an undoubted testimony to her contribution to keeping India's classical traditions alive.

We do not want to leave aside María Renée Cura (1927-2007) from this review. This Geography teacher born far from Buenos Aires turned bookseller, writer and editor. She would accompany



Victoria Ocampo for almost twenty years as her personal assistant and would develop a close friendship with Indira Gandhi. The Padmashree distinction the Government of India awarded her in 1984 attests to her valuable contribution to the knowledge of classical and contemporary India, both through her work, the Anand Bhavan Center she founded and the publications she did. Ambassador Escalante informs that in 1975, on celebrating the "International Year of the Woman", India distinguished more than 40 people. Among them were Victoria Ocampo, the teacher María Renée Cura and the artist Myrta Barvié" (Fernandez Escalante, 2000).

## Conclusion

This decisive role of Argentine women in the approach to the classical culture of India is still valid today. We can quote just a few examples:

- a large part of the most recognized spiritual institutions related to India and based in Argentina (The Art of Living; the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University; the Hastinapura Foundation, among others) are presided and managed by women;
- the main disciples of Father Ismael Quiles at the University School of Eastern Studies were women and they keep teaching throughout the country;
- the Sanskrit Chair at the Buenos Aires University (UBA) was designed and is run by a woman, Dr. Rosalía Vofchuk;
- Indian classical dancers in Argentina are women, disciples of Myrta Barbie.
- As usual in the West, most skillful yoga practitioners are also women.

Although the 21st century would seem to be the century of women, in this, as in other fields, the deeper we look, the more we realize that although women had always-leading roles, they were just overshadowed by official history.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> He arrived in Buenos Aires on his way to Lima, Perú, where he had been invited to lecture during the centennial celebrations of the republic of Peru. Nevertheless, he couldn't keep on travelling, since he got sick on the ship that brought him from Brazil to Argentina. He then stayed in Argentina for almost two months.

<sup>ii</sup> In this paper, when not alternately noted, translations from Spanish texts are by the author.

<sup>iii</sup> Still a must-read classic by Ketaki K. Dyson "In your blossoming flower-garden: Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo", Sahitya Academy, 1988. Translated to Spanish and published in 2019, Un encuentro fecundo, Editorial Sur, Buenos Aires.

<sup>iv</sup> She is unfairly known as Guiralde's wife by the predominantly male chauvinist historiography.

<sup>v</sup> He was awarded for this work the National Literature Prize in 1927, while living in Paris, just three days before passing away.

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