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Sanskrit and Prakrit as National Link Languages: A Balanced Assessment

Sujay Rao Mandavilli

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The History of Sanskrit

Of hoary antiquity, Sanskrit is generally considered to be one of the greatest languages in the world. Sanskrit has been a popular language in institutions around the world since at least the eighteenth century. The earliest European scholars in Sanskrit were perhaps Heinrich Roth (1620–1668) and Johann Ernst Hanxleden (1681–1731). The discovery of the Indo-European language family by Sir William Jones, comprising both Indian and European languages was another epochal event. Most scholars now believe that both the branches of the family had a common, but a now defunct ancestor known as the PIE or the proto Indo-European language.

The beauty of Sanskrit was so highly appreciated by Westerners that Sir William Jones, speaking to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on February 2, 1786, said:

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.

Sanskrit literature comprises of a large number of philosophical and religious texts and is believed to have been compiled in around 1500 BC or earlier. Today, Sanskrit is widely used as a ceremonial language in Hindu religious rituals and Sanskrit hymns, slokas and mantras are very commonly used to this day. Spoken Sanskrit, though extremely rare is in use in a few traditional institutions in India, and there have been some sporadic attempts at revival. Vedic Sanskrit evolved into the Classical Sanskrit of later texts, is believed that Panini laid down the grammar of the Sanskrit language in the fourth Century BC.

Attempts to Revive Sanskrit

A few attempts at reviving the Sanskrit language have indeed been undertaken in the Republic of India since independence. A few organizations like the Samskrta Bharati conduct **Speak Sanskrit** workshops to popularize the language. Festivals like the "All-India Sanskrit Festival" have helped create awareness about the greatness of the language among the masses.

According to the 1991 Indian census, there were 49,736 fluent speakers of Sanskrit in India.

The CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) in India has made Sanskrit an optional third language in some of its schools. All India Radio also transmits news bulletins in Sanskrit and conducts programs to teach the language. The Mattur village in central Karnataka has several speakers of Sanskrit among its population. People of different castes and even the local Muslims speak and converse in Sanskrit. The former Union Human Resources Minister of the BJP, Murali Manohar Joshi had even announced that 1999 would be the year of Sanskrit, a move that sparked protests from some quarters.

Support for Sanskrit as a Link Language

Both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother of the Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry had suggested that Sanskrit should be the national language of India, stating, “Hindi is good for the Hindi belt, Sanskrit is good for all Indians.” Ambedkar, a messiah for the downtrodden, is believed to have himself studied Sanskrit, and, according to some sources, has supported it as a link language

Position of Dalits

An interesting case in point is Jyothi Rao Phule of Maharashtra who portrayed Aryans as invaders and the so-called “lower caste people” as original inhabitants of India, and described Aryan culture along with caste system as alien to these original people. However, Marathi is itself an Indo-Aryan language and few can deny the fact that Aryan, Dravidian and a large number of other cultures have become inseparably intertwined. Other Dalit activists like Kancha Ilaiah of Andhra Pradesh have termed the influences of Sanskrit on Telugu and other Indian languages derogatory and have largely seen English as a tool of emancipation for the downtrodden masses. Dalits have a genuine reason for complaint: Sanskrit is often seen as a perpetrator of Brahmanical hegemony and the oppression of the downtrodden in the still-prevalent caste system.

It is a memory we are desperately seeking to forget.

Although the hold of the Caste system may continue to wane, the sensitivities of Dalits undoubtedly need to be taken into account in any discussion. On the whole, many Dalit groups continue to be critical of Sanskrit and see the Vedic period as a dark chapter in Indian history, a view diametrically opposed to the Hindutva view of history (Anand 1999).

Position of Muslims

Contrary to popular perception, most Muslims recognize the fact that language is a separate entity from religion and generally not exhibited any qualms or inhibitions about learning the language. For example, Professor Ahmad Hasan Dani, the famous Pakistani archaeologist and Sanskritologist, a Muslim, graduated from the Benares Hindu

University. Maulana Shaheen, a religious scholar, strongly feels that Sanskrit is gaining popularity in madrassas. He says: “We want to study Sanskrit, and learn about Hindu religious texts.” According to him, this helps Muslims understand the Hindu religion better. The Sanskrit Sansthan, which is a deemed university, is now regularly sending its graduates to conduct three-month preliminary courses in various madrassas that have opted Sanskrit in the curriculum.

Interestingly, Mahmud the Gazanavi used Sanskrit on his coins, and it is believed that Sanskrit was in use as an official language during early Muslim rule in Kashmir.

This is also an interesting topic of discussion among Muslims on the Internet about the viability of Sanskrit as a link language. This apart, many Muslims may have a fear that the adoption of Sanskrit as a link language would indirectly encourage the far-right, a fear not entirely misplaced, and, undoubtedly, all positions need to be taken into account before the adoption of any language policy.

Dravidian Parties

The opposition to the imposition of Hindi has been the strongest in Tamilnadu and dates back to the 1920's. Unlike most other language groups, purists among Tamils have seen Sanskrit influences on Tamil as alien. The DMK website has this to say about the influence of Sanskrit on Tamil. “From time immemorial Sanskrit, the mother of Hindi, made futile attempts to dominate and destroy Tamil. The conflict with Tamil Poet Nakkirar in Sangam Literature and competition of Sanskrit musician Hemanathan in Puranas, depict the battles won by Tamil.” Another DMK member even changed his name from Gnanasundaram to Mathialagan, embarrassed that his name was of Sanskrit origin. The Thani Tamil Iyakkam was another movement that sought to purge Tamil of all Sanskrit words. Karunanidhi has however clarified that he never had anything against Hindi or Sanskrit but was only against the imposition of one language on the other. In daily life, few Tamils would, however, subscribe to such extremism: most Indic cultures and languages are much more closely related to each other than most people would accept. For example,

- While Tamil may be the oldest living Indian language, the the Tamil script or the Tamil Brahmi script dates back to 600 BC and is derived from the Brahmi script of North India
- Tamil has a large number of loan words from Sanskrit many of which are used in every day speech. Sanskrit words are referred to as *vadacol* in the Ancient Tamil treatise on grammar *Tholkappiyam*.
- Tamils are clearly related to other Dravidian people. While Telugus are ethnically Dravidians, many aspects of their culture are derived from various other sources as well. Some Tamils themselves observe Vedic rituals.
- Again, many people of the Jharkhand, Chattisgarh belt may be related to Dravidians.
- The religion of the Tamils (Most rituals, the word OM, for example) has several common points with the religions of the Gangetic plain, eg. Siva, Ganesha are

worshipped in the north. Even the Tamil (Hindu) new year is calculated using the Tamil Almanac.

- Many north Indians worship in temples in Tamilnadu. Many holy places of the Tamils are located in Andhra Pradesh and Kerela. Many Tamils travel to North India on pilgrimage.
- The term *Dravidian* itself is a linguistic label.
- There have been significant cultural exchanges: Agastiyar's visit to the south. Tamil kings are mentioned in Sanskrit epics such as the *Mahabharata* as allies. Sanskrit epics were translated into Tamil more than 1500 years ago.
- Many early Tamil kings eg. Pallava king Simhavishnu (560 – 580 AD) had Sanskrit influenced names. Many were influenced by Vedic beliefs.
- Some more common points between Tamil and Indo-Aryan cultures: Greeting style, Food habits, Dress, Dance, festivals. In other words, India is a collection of inter-related cultures.
- The Tamil kingdoms were themselves never united in their history and the state came under the influence of several kingdoms from Andhra and Karnataka in its history. Moreover, Tamilnadu itself as a political unit was created from the Madras presidency after independence in the 1950's. We must remember that political and cultural units could be different both at the national and regional levels.

Sanskrit versus Hindi: The Position of Hindu Nationalist Parties

Sri Atal Behari Vajpayee is a self-professed champion of Hindi and even spoke Hindi in the UN. The BJP has often played the Hindi card when it found it suitable and downplayed it at other times. Some BJP ministers have been critical of the growing power of English and its threat to Hindi. On the other hand, the late Mr. Promod Mahajan, had acknowledged that the success of Indian Information Technology sector around the world was due to the competence of Indian experts in English. The BJP during its tenure had encouraged the learning of Sanskrit along with Hindi and had introduced the study of the Vedas in states ruled by it. The official position of the BJP with respect to Sanskrit as a national or a link language does not appear to be clear.

The Position of Communists

Marxists and the Hindu nationalist parties have traditionally taken diametrically opposite positions. Nalini Taneja, a left-leaning author, had this to say about BJP and Sanskrit during a recruitment drive by the Hindu nationalist parties in the early 2000's.

The advertisement for recruitment of Sanskrit teachers is in line with the introduction of the courses of Vedic astrology, karmakand and yogic consciousness. Let us not be under the illusion that spoken Sanskrit is going to mean innocent conversation classes, devoid of RSS propaganda. They will essentially be RSS study circles/classes, no less. Spoken Sanskrit, along with the other saffron courses initiated by the government, is nothing but a ploy to facilitate the mass entry and intervention of RSS cadres into academic institutions, particularly universities, where a very

large body of young people and teachers converge.(Nalinini Taneja in *People's Democracy*, September 2001).

Marxists have ideologically-driven views on the subject and continue to be critical of anything that might be seen to promote *Hindutva* in the short or the long term.

Extinct Language: Lack of Drivers

Another major problem with Sanskrit is that it is by and large an extinct language. Hindi and English spread only because vested interests spread or promote them. Who will promote Sanskrit? Identifying drivers would be very crucial to make any efforts to promote Sanskrit a success. Patriotism, Convenience, the genuine need for a link language might enable it to spread. Hindu nationalist parties would also probably attempt to promote the language, an idea not without its own pitfalls and undesirable effects.

Sanskrit May Never Have Been a Widely Spoken Language

According to the Aryan Invasion or migrating theories, the Aryans from Central Asia brought an ancestor of Sanskrit also known as the Proto Indo-European language or the PIE to India. It is believed that this now defunct language synthesized with several other languages spoken through most of Northern India and developed into Vedic Sanskrit. Most Historians believe that the knowledge of Sanskrit was limited only to the educated few and was used mainly for religious purposes. The masses spoke various other languages like Prakrit.

Revival of Hebrew

Hebrew survived as a written language of Jewish communities for millennia, and some educated Jews even used it to communicate among themselves. It has had several ups and downs and the Haskalah movement and the movement of Jewish activist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda attempted to increase its popularity in the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, Hebrew had greatly increased in popularity. The process of Hebrew's return to regular usage is interesting and even unparalleled in history.

The Failure of Esperanto

Esperanto was developed in the 1870s and the 1880s by Dr. Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof, and the first Esperanto grammar was published in 1887. The number of speakers grew rapidly over the next few decades in different parts of the world. In 1905, the first world congress of Esperanto speakers was held in Boulogne-sur-Mere, France. Since then world congresses have been held in different countries at regular intervals. Although Esperanto has had its supporters, it has not been successful to a great degree, a major reason being that English is already entrenched as a global language.

Impact on the Local language

Different scholars have different opinions about the Neutrality of Sanskrit. However one advantage of Sanskrit over Hindi, is that it is not the language of a particular state and unlike Hindi, would not create discrimination across states, excepting for the fact that some Indian languages are more closely related to Sanskrit than others.

Lack of International Prestige

Another potential problem with Sanskrit is its lack of international standing when compared to languages like English and French, a factor which is unlikely to work in its favour.

Too Late in the Game

Another major drawback of making paradigm shifts in language policy is that there is a certain feeling of fatigue already; Hindi, which was chosen with high expectations and little consensus, has obviously failed. English for all practical purposes rules the roost in India. People may be unwilling to experiment and make paradigm shifts six decades after Independence when preferences have clearly become crystallized.

What About Prakrit?

Prakrit which means natural loosely refers to a broad family of Languages and dialects spoken in ancient India, particularly North India. Some Dialects of Prakrit were also used in South India as administrative languages particularly in the Shatavahana empire and Prakrit also greatly influenced Tamil, Telugu and other South Indian languages. The Department of Sanskrit and Prakrit Languages, University of Pune, plays an important role in the preservation of Prakrit literature.

Advantages of Hindi Over Sanskrit

The principal advantage of Hindi over Sanskrit is that as a living language, it was in a way already used as a lingo throughout most of North India where mutually unintelligible dialects were spoken and also in parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat. India's first motion picture, although silent, was made by a Marathi man. Mumbai developed as a vibrant centre of Hindi Cinema even before independence. Besides, it was closely related to many other languages of the region and had a critical mass to enable it to spread on the shortest possible time.

In the early days of independence, centralization may have been necessary to stave off external threats. In an age where people spoke to each other in a smattering of English, Hindi may have finally enabled people to communicate in a language that was quite like their own. It may have been a perfect short-term solution.

Conclusion

The answer to this vexed question can obviously neither be in the affirmative nor negative. Since a question as complex as this has many dimensions and ramifications, one possible way to mitigate possible risks is to adopt a consensus-based approach. Different state governments and political parties may be asked to give their in-principle approval to any new policy and surveys may be conducted to understand the preferences of the people after which it may be made an optional third language if all parties agree. However, no language is ever likely to displace English in India, or even reduce its importance, even in the long run.

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