

The Second Linguistic Survey

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After more than one hundred years, the next Linguistic Survey of India is on the way in the 11th five-year plan, commencing soon. It will 'examine the structure of various speech varieties of the country, their functions, scripts, history, demography, as well as their spread, including diaspora, literacy and education, digitaracy, literatures and all the linguistic artifacts and media products that these speech varieties produce.'

Language is an integral part of culture; cultural elements do not have a life of their own. Otherwise, the world's finest culture should have developed in, for example, Central Asia where Indian, Chinese and Greek — the world's three leading cultures — intermingled, as is seen from the art forms discovered in places like Turfan. These once populous crossroads of the world's land surface decayed long before the Mongol conquest without much visible influence upon cultural history.

'Speech has both an individual and a social side, and we cannot conceive of one without the other,' said Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics. The scope of linguistics is 'to determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, and to deduce the general laws to which all specific historical phenomena can be reduced.' To that end this note presents a sample of episodes from the linguistic history of India.

1. *A Historic Blunder.* More than a thousand years after the Rigveda was composed, the Purvamimamsa decreed the monopolization of Sanskrit language in favour of a narrow section of the population, viz. the religion-professionals, barring the sudras from its precincts. Sanskrit therefore never functioned as an everyday medium of communication, nor was it ever used as a link-or trade-language like other comparable codes such as Greek, Latin, Arabic or Chinese. The concerned Mimamsa-sutra, attributed to Jaimini (second century BC), set for ever the tone of India's linguistics and much else.

At its best Sanskrit literature is exquisite, with an intricate pattern of beauty. But even at its best it does not display the depth, the simplicity of expression, the grandeur of spirit, the real greatness of humanity that one finds in other classical languages and literatures. Sanskrit suffered from its long, monopolistic association with a social class that had no direct interest in techniques, manual operations, trade agreements, contracts or surveys. The class did have leisure enough to write tenuous ideas in a tortuous manner above the reach of common herd. Prose virtually disappeared from high literary Sanskrit. Words that survived in literary uses took so many different supplementary meanings that a good Sanskrit text cannot be interpreted without a commentary. The glosses are often demonstrably wrong and succeed only in confusing the text. There is no Sanskrit work of any use to the blacksmith, potter, carpenter, weaver, ploughman.

The distinction between Sanskrit and Arabic is vivid. Arab works on medicine, geography, mathematics, astronomy, practical sciences were precise enough to be used in their day from Oxford to Malaya. Yet Arabic too had been imposed with a new religion upon people of many different nationalities. The difference was that Arab literati were not primarily a disdainful religion-professional class of the Indian variety. Those Arabs who wrote were not ashamed to participate in trade, warfare and experimental science, nor to write annals.

The later *vedas* and *upanisads* are full of word-mysticism. Floridity became increasingly a characteristic of Sanskrit so that the use of twisted construction, intricate compounds, innumerable synonyms, over-exaggeration make it more and more difficult to obtain precise meaning from a Sanskrit document. Technical literature suffers most from this victory of form over meaning.

Sanskrit terminology is anything but precise. The Sanskrit plant-name *ananta* ('without end'), cited in medical treatises, is of no less than fourteen different species, from a foot-high shrub to a tall tree. This not only indicates local variation, influence of local usages and languages, but shows how Indian science degenerated into secret disciplines. Most of the fourteen plants are in use today. Every Ayurvedic physician maintains that his is THE real '*ananta*', the next man (who treats the same disease by a totally different '*ananta*' plant) an ignorant quack.

Mathematical and astronomical works put into the *sutra* (formula) form are easily memorized, but incomprehensible to the uninitiated because each number and operation is denoted by many different words that have other meanings in ordinary usage. The later works on iconography, painting, architecture which are still extant do not tally with measurements of statutory buildings and chemical analysis of pigments. The artists and masons went their own way.

It was from the experiments with alchemy that Arabs, in the tenth century, came to grasp the logic of induction (as distinct from deduction, so familiar to ancient Greeks) which subsequently opened the door for the modern scientific method. In the event, the word 'alchemy' derived from Arabic 'al-chemy'. More than a millennium ago, alchemy was mentioned in the fourteenth section of Chanakya's Arthashastra (fourth century BC): evidently, it was practiced during the Maurya period as well. Chanakya's treatise could not possibly have been a public textbook. Apple had fallen long ago in India, too; but no commoner Isaac Newton was allowed to contemplate below an apple tree.

Yet, Sanskrit had once spread across southern Asia with memorable speed. Within a mere two centuries around the beginning of the first millennium, Sanskrit literary culture traveled wide in southern Asia from Kashmir and Purusapura (Peshawar) in the foothills of the western Himalayas eastward to Champa (central Vietnam), Parambanam on the plains of central Java, and even beyond in the further islands of today's Indonesia, from the Kathmandu

Valley in the north to the southernmost reaches of peninsular India and even, periodically, Sri Lanka.

The Asia trip of Sanskrit was inaugurated by Shaka Kshatrap (satrap, prince) Rudradaman who had desacrilized 'the language of the gods' bringing it down to this world of politics: he did it in the interests of a new cultural politics. He was the first to have inscriptions of royal panegyric in Sanskrit set on rocks.

This mundane application of the divine language was a method followed to endear a ruler of foreign descent to the indigenous ruling class. In the case of Rudradaman, a Shaka, and his deputy, Suvisakha, a Parthian, the adoption of Sanskrit and the patronage of those who held it dear was designed to reconcile brahman opinion to a foreign ruler — 'to mitigate the lamentable choice of parents on the part of Satrap and governor.'

2. *Path Dependency*: One millennium later, local speech forms were dignified as literary languages and began to challenge Sanskrit for the work of both poetry and polity, and in the end replaced it. Thus came vernacular languages to life — Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Bengali, and the like. Indeed, these regional languages were typically initiated and promoted from the centre of polity, at the court of the ruling lord. Of course, Sanskrit literature nourished vernacular traditions everywhere, epics having inspired their themes.

There are several accounts of vernacular defiance from around the middle of the second millennium. Here are two cases — one concerns Eknath, a brahman poet of the late sixteenth century; the other, Tukaram, a sudra poet of the early seventeenth century.

Tukaram performed hymns of praise (kirtan) to god Visnu and composed pleasing poems that delighted the people. He was charged with the alleged sin of teaching principles contrary to religion and leading people to accept devotion (*bhakti*). His language was Marathi, and therefore impure. It should never be heard. The brahman-power seized the manuscripts of his metrical compositions, weighted them with stone, and sank them in river Indrayani, declaring, 'If within 13 days, god Visnu takes them out dry, only then shall we pay honour.' After 13 days, so runs the legend, Tuka's manuscripts were seen floating on the surface of the river, unharmed. In thankful praise Tukaram composed seven poems in Marathi, all filled with literary emotion of compassion.

Structurally similar was the story of Eknath. He wrote in Marathi a poetic version of the Bhagavata-purana, the central religious-literary work of medieval *Vaishnavism*. Two chapters of his work were taken to Varanasi for judgment by some disciples of the leaders of a powerful monastic order, who feared that the vernacular text would supersede the Sanskrit original. Summoned to Varanasi to answer for his improprieties, Eknath eventually won over the abbot, but other scholars remained hostile and seized the Marathi text, threw it into the Ganga. Miraculously, the folklore continues, the river lifted up both her arms and caught the book in her hands. All the brahmans of Varanasi

then worshipped the book with due rites and made copies of it with their own hand.

It was predominantly Sanskrit knowledge and texts that underwrote and sustained the regional languages. Foremost among these were the new epics (especially Mahabharatas) that appeared in a veritable flood, outfitted with new local forms and embodying a distinctly local aesthetic. Herein resides a shortfall that characterizes India's vernaculars. They had halted at the shadow of epics, in the main Mahabharata, rather than proceeding further to reach the vedas, with the same degree of enthusiasm that they had bestowed upon the epics. For examples, works on the vedas in Bengali is amazingly scarce. The vedas are a fruit of free mind, under open sky, unencumbered by the fog of politics. The epics, by contrast, are essentially political, much less spiritual. Regional language has remained in the latter's groove.

3. *Remarks:* One-and-a-half millennium after the Rigveda, virtually self-sufficient village sprouted for the first time as the basic unit of production. Now land has to be cleared and tilled. Social differentiation surfaced, which was to be formally earmarked and fortified.

This is the context in which the Purvamimamsa first articulated one of the key differences of the varna ordering: the right of access to the Sanskrit vedic texts and thereby to the ethical realm of dharma. The sudra was denied the right. Sanskrit is 'the language of the gods'; all other languages are impure, unworthy of being heard.

Today, to quote Saussure again, 'language is no longer looked upon as an organism that develops independently but as a product of the collective mind of linguistic groups.' The singular utterance is no more than a local manifestation of the great system of language itself, to whose metropolitan and impersonal laws it is wholly subordinate. No language is purer than any other. No language is uncreated. All languages are equal in the same manner as all human beings are. It implies that no state government has a mandate to enforce one medium of instruction for all students in all schools.

An editorial in a recent issue of its mouthpiece, *Panchjanya*, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has opened the door of Sanskrit to sudras: it exhorts Hindus to come together by erasing caste lines, and invites dalit and other backward classes to be trained and appointed as head priests at major temples in the country. Now this proposal of RSS would entail overriding the injunction of the sacred *Purvami-mamsa*. Then the RSS has to rewrite this scripture as well as others so as to make them consistent with its political programme. Will the RSS keep its word and follow up with necessary literary rectification?

It takes us to a related question. Scholars generally think that the Aryan tribes originated in the Caucasus region of Central Asia, and migrated to Europe, Iran and India. One piece of evidence is the astonishing similarity between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. Sanskrit was of a wonderful structure, more perfect than Greek and more copious than Latin, yet bearing to both of

them a strange affinity, both in roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than can possibly have been produced by accident. They must have sprung from some common source which perhaps no longer exists.

Following V D Savarkar's pamphlet, "*Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*", the RSS holds a contrary view, namely, the Aryans were an indigenous people who had been living on the bank of river Sindhu since the beginning of time. Accordingly, they had identified themselves as 'Sindhu', after the name of that river. Letter S of Sindhu, however, got mutated into letter H in colloquial Prakrit producing the term, Hindu. Aryans thus came to be known as Hindus. Hindus, therefore, are an ancient people of India, concludes the RSS.

But, one may ask, in that case why didn't the expression Hindu then appear in the vedas? To which the RSS would retort that Hindu, being a Prakrit entity, could not acquire a place in 'the language of the gods', viz. Sanskrit.

But, if it were so, one would expect to find 'Sindhu' representing the Aryans in the pages of the vedas. Evidently, the word Sindhu occurs in all 12 times in the vedas; but everywhere it means the river only, nowhere does it represent a group of people, Aryans or others. So the RSS theory on the origin of Hindu has no evidence. In all fairness the RSS ought to learn the lesson of history and give up its pretension.

Because Sanskrit had been kept away from the common people the error of the RSS could not be detected earlier. Had the literature been open to the people the content of the scriptures would have been exposed long ago.

Historical records show the conception of Hindu as a group of people of a particular faith emerged much later. The term Hindu appeared for the first time in fourteenth-century Sanskrit inscriptions as a (contrastive) self-identification in response to the presence of Turkic power. The Aryans did not seem to have the notion of a group of people other than as subjects (praja) of the king.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has assumed Hindutva as its core value. But inadequacy of Savarkar's idea of Hindutva is as simple as anything else. Sooner the BJP jettisons that mantra better would it be for both Hinduism and India.

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