

SANSKRIT, LATIN, ARABIC

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“The Arabs 2000 years later [after the Aryans in India] showed a parallel action—including the linguistic change—upon a different social level”—D D Kosambi.

These three languages –Sanskrit, Latin, Arabic –have so much in common, yet their paths had diverged. Human being is a being in language. It is through language that the world is opened up for us. We learn to know the world by learning to master a language. Hence we cannot really understand ourselves unless we understand ourselves as situated in a linguistically mediated, historical culture. Language is our second nature, nurtured as it is by history.

In 1786, addressing an audience at the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, William Jones, an English polymath, announced his study of Sanskrit: It was ‘of a wonderful structure’, he said, ‘more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin.’ They bear strong affinity in several words, as well as both in the roots of verbs and the form of grammar – an affinity that could not have been produced by accident. They probably have sprung from some common source. Scholars at first reckoned that ‘common source’ as an ‘Indo-Germanic’, or ‘Indo-European’ language; this changed to ‘Indo-Aryan’, or simply the ‘Aryan’.

Arabic is the largest member of the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family, and is closely related to Hebrew and Aramaic. Yet, with regard to the course of evolution, Arabic and Sanskrit bear a fair degree of resemblance. By the same token, historical experiences of the two corresponding communities have come to display certain parallelism. This part of the story could repay greater attention.

1. *Sanskrit* : The ancient Aryans in India revered Sanskrit as ‘the language of the gods’, uncreated, without origin, already preexistent in the world. From which they inferred: hence the Veda itself could be considered beginningless, eternal, immune to the kinds of error, and unconstrained by the kinds of limits, of which all other human communication is subject. It could not be translated into a mundane language.

For 1500 years, Sanskrit had remained confined as a code of liturgy, accessible only to a class of ritual-professionals. Sudras explicitly were deprived of the knowledge of Sanskrit. Piety is of two types, namely orthopraxy (behavioral correctness) and orthodoxy (doctrinal correctness). For the people, orthopraxy was sufficient. Which says that mere repeating of mantras prompted by priests was enough; comprehension of their meaning was not required. It will transpire in a moment that for Muslims too a similar injunction with regard to the Koran is in force.

At the beginning of the first millennium, Rudradaman, the Shaka king of Gandhara and the Panjab, desecralized Sanskrit by releasing it into the domain

of cultural politics. He was the first to use Sanskrit in inscriptions of royal panegyric (*prasasti*) set on rocks. The idea of inscription in Sanskrit caught on. Rulers in Sumatra, Java, Indo-China and other parts of south-east Asia welcomed vedic culture. After all, Sanskrit slokas were sweet music to royal ears and reassuring balm to assembled subjects. Vedic hymns chanted at royal consecration establish the king upon his throne and make his future reign secure: 'I have brought you here; remain among us. ... Indra has supported him firmly' — 'firmly': that must signify a long haul. The Manusmriti proclaims the king an incarnation of gods: having been constituted with 'lasting elements from Indra, Varuna, Kuber, ...therefore, he surpasses all living beings in brilliant energy.' 'Lasting elements': that must be the sign of an enduring kingdom.

The period 1000-1500 saw the expansion of agriculture throughout Eurasia and the consolidation of a pre-capitalist world system. Reinvigorated trading networks concentrated wealth in local power centre. A sense of regional identity began to take hold. And so came regional languages, the vernaculars — Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Bangla, and so on.

It was Sanskrit literature that had inaugurated vernacular traditions almost everywhere. The epics, especially the *Mahabharata*, provided literary themes. The regional language movement was initiated and promoted from the centre of polity, at the court of the ruling lord.

The languages received their names from ecospheres as it were. Kannada thus betokens the language of the 'cultivated land of black soil'; Malayalam that of the 'sandalwood mountains'; Brajabhasa that of the place of Krishna's birth; Gwaliyari, Bundeli, Sindhi, Bangla, and so on the languages of those places. By contrast, in Europe, language names would reflect facts of biology and ethnology, and so belong to the peoples, like French, the language of Franks, or English that of the Angles. This dichotomy suggests differential social parameters.

2. *Latin*: Like Sanskrit, Latin is an ancient Indo-European language. Originally it was spoken as a local language in Latium (central Italy), the region immediately surrounding Rome. It gained wide currency as the formal language of the Roman Republic and Roman Empire, and later through its adoption by medieval scholars as well as the Catholic Church. Greek shaped the development of Latin in the formative years of its literary culture on the global scale.

The colloquial Latin gradually evolved into a number of distinct Romance languages including Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian and Romanian. Although English is not descended from Latin, being Germanic rather than Romance in origin, English borrows heavily from Latin: 60 percent of the English vocabulary finds its roots in Latin.

Regional languages in Europe sprouted at about the same time as they did in India, that is, in the early second millennium. Their patrons were similar, namely direct guidance of the royal court. Asia and Europe differed in naming

vernacular languages. Europe was informed by the concept that 'language makes the people'. What language names such as English, French, German, Spanish share is a concern with origins, purity of descent and exclusion of mixture as well as a sense of historical necessity and a growing conception of peoples as the subject of history — and, therefore, perhaps inevitably, of peoples and languages in competition.

The concerns of vernacular intellectuals in India were entirely different. Here 'caste makes the people'. No doubt social forces such as caste endogamy worked against integrative ethnicity. Peoples already having been classified by caste marks, language name could no longer acquire salience to confer them identity.

3. *Arabic*: In the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asian language family, Arabic is the largest member, closely related to Hebrew and Aramaic. It is spoken throughout Arabia and is widely studied and known in all Muslim communities in the world.

Arabs consider literary Arabic as the standard language and tend to view everything else as mere dialects. Literary Arabic refers both to the language of the Koran and the language of present-day media in North Africa and the Middle East such as television and radio and practically all written matter including books, newspapers, magazines and documents of every kind. The sociolinguistic situation of Arabic in modern times provides a prime example of the linguistic phenomenon of diglossia, that is, normal use of two separate varieties of the same language, usually in different social situations. Six major groups of Arabic dialects are: Egyptian, Maghreb, Levantine, Iraqi, East Arabian, and Gulf. Minor Arabic dialects include: Hassaniya, Andalusi, Sudanese, Hijazi, Najdi, and Yemeni.

Arabic literature emerged in the sixth century with only fragments of the written language appearing before then. It was the Koran in the seventh century which would have the greatest lasting effect on Arabic culture and its literature. The Koran is expressed in Arabic, and traditionally Muslims deem it impossible to translate in a way that would adequately reflect its exact meaning. Indeed, until recently some schools of thought maintained that the Koran should not be translated at all. Recall that orthodox Vedic pandits had cherished a comparable view with regard to the Veda and its language, Sanskrit.

The estimated number of people speaking Arabic is less than 300 million, compared with 1,500 million total Muslim population of the world. By this count, at least 80 percent of this global community does not speak Arabic, while all of them are familiar with some fixed phrases of the language such as those used in their prayer, without necessarily knowing their meaning. Here is an example of the practice of orthopraxy as distinct from orthodoxy. Another example is the ritual among Hindus repeating Sanskrit mantras after the priest, not always conversant with the content of those utterances.

4. *Remark*: Ruling power and religious faith had directly or indirectly shaped the course of language and literature everywhere. A question is:

how much had the people participated in language and literature with full knowledge about the origin and content of these articles of culture? It appears that language had often worked like a veil that shuts off people's view to the scriptures and their true meaning.

The case of Sanskrit is clearly evident. A majority of the people was openly denied entry to the premises of that language and literature. The situation with Arabic is more subtle. Even in non-Arab lands, the call to prayer and the prayers themselves were almost always in Arabic, a language few understood. Ataturk (Kemal Pasha) had issued a directive that the call to prayer in mosques in Turkey be in Turkish, rather than in Arabic. Contemporary Islamists considered Ataturk's injunction an attack on the concerned religion; the directive was rescinded after Ataturk's death.

The BBC, in December 2005, reported the results of a poll of British Muslims calling for imams and clerics in the UK to preach in the English language. The poll found 65 percent of Muslims in Britain supported such a move. It is said to represent a massive British Muslim consensus for change to regional language. Scholars told that the public opinion might lead to a worldwide movement with this view. 'If that happens, Muslims could be saying namaaz in Hindi or Hindustani rather than Arabic, just as Catholics were allowed to do by the Vatican in the 1960s,' said a scholar. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church used Latin as its primary liturgical language until the advent of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, after which the various vernacular languages of the faithful were allowed in the liturgy. However, Ecclesiastical Latin remains the official language of Vatican City.

The BBC poll found that with more than half of UK Muslims having been born in Britain, it was important for British Muslims to hear more English in mosques. Many of the over-1000 respondents in the poll said they thought English-speaking imams would help close the prevailing cultural divides between Muslims and the mainstream society (*The Times of India*, 8 December 2005, web edition).

So far Sanskrit scriptures have remained beyond the pale of common people. Vernacular languages, offspring of Sanskrit, have circled in the groove of epics, especially the *Mahabharata* but never venturing to approach the *Vedas*. Meanwhile, the *Vedas* had been misrepresented or distorted with impunity by subsequent Sanskrit works. It is not too late to translate all basic Sanskrit religious texts into regional languages, and conduct liturgical and ritual performances in local tongues which people understand.

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