

MYTH AND REALITY

Sanskrit and the Indian Language Families

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[In the making of the modern Indian nation, a lot of myths and popular notions got created in the 18th and the 19th century. One of the common threads among these was that ancient India (read Hindu) was great and that India became backward and decadent during the medieval (read Muslim) period. This article attempts to explore two of these myths and popular notions about the Sanskrit language and its relationship to Indian languages. These are: 1. Sanskrit is the mother of all Indian languages and 2. Indian languages are divided into two large families known as Dravidian and Indo-Aryan families. The article argues that Sanskrit is not mother to any Indian language. It also traces the history of the creation of this notion. Then it argues that the division of Indian languages into Dravidian and Indo-Aryan families is false. It goes on to explain the true relationship of Sanskrit to Indian languages and argues that all Indian languages form one family.]

Sanskrit is the classical language of India. Today there is no speech community of Sanskrit, that is, nobody uses Sanskrit as the main language of normal daily use (except a couple of Brahmin villages in Shimoga district, Karnataka). But it is not a dead language either. It is taught in schools though practically no one learns it. However, many upper caste Indians would know a few phrases/couplets of Sanskrit. In the vocabulary of standard modern Indian languages, there are a large number of words derived from Sanskrit. It is the language of rituals for the upper castes. There are probably a few hundred people who know Sanskrit well, most of who are Brahmins. There are also a large number of Brahmin priests who know enough Sanskrit to perform rituals. The level of their knowledge varies a lot from priest to priest.

Sanskrit also has been the language of *Shastra*, of knowledge of the Indian tradition. Even in the 20th century the musicologist Bhatkhande wrote his book in Sanskrit. Over the last two thousand years, there have been books in Sanskrit on politics, philosophy, religion, theology, ethics, mathematics, astrology, medicine and a host of other fields of knowledge. Panini's grammar, Patanjali's Yogashastra, Chanakya's Arthashastra, Manu's Dharmashastra, Aryabhatta and Varahamihir in mathematics and astronomy are just some of the known books. Today many of them are translated into English and into some Indian languages and are used mainly by scholars. However, in the mainstream of Indian life, knowledge and industry, Sanskrit has practically no role. English and modern Indian languages rule.

Historically Sanskrit was the language of the people in North-West India, west of the river Ravi. The areas covered then are today's Afghanistan, Baluchistan and western parts of Kashmir, and Punjab. The area probably extended upto Iran whose language and culture had close affinity to the Vedic Sanskrit. The important centre was in Pakhtunistan (the land of Pathans) or the North West Frontier province of Pakistan and was known as Gandhar whose main town Takshashila (today's Taxila in Pakistan) was famous as a seat of learning roughly between 5th century BC and 5th century AD.

The Sanskrit that people know today got the present classical form between the 3rd century BC and the 3rd century AD when it received patronage from the Hindu kings. During this period Kautilya's Arthashastra, Manusmriti or Dharmashastra and an elaborate and perfect grammar was created. The other important language of the era was Pali, with its centres in Patliputra (Patna) and Nalanda under the patronage of Buddhist kings. Sanskrit and Pali coexisted and competed to be known as the language of the state during the 1000 years between the 5th century BC and the 5th century AD.

With the arrival of the Muslim rulers, both the languages gradually ceased to be the language of the state. Persian replaced these languages although no Persian ever ruled over India! Pali more or less vanished from India, although it remained in use in Sri Lanka. And as everyone knows, English replaced Persian and today in spite of many efforts by the supporters of modern Indian languages, English remains the language of power and knowledge.

Several questions arise. Why and how has Sanskrit survived? Latin does not have this kind of presence in Europe. Why was such a perfect grammar created? What is the relationship between Sanskrit and modern Indian Languages?

India is linguistically defined as the area east of the Indus river system, south of the lower Himalayas. In the east it covers western regions of Bangladesh and finally it is bounded by the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. In that sense the political boundaries of present day India do reflect, at least linguistically, a homogeneous region. By the same count, Sanskrit would appear as a language from across the border, a foreign language, although there are no takers of Sanskrit in its original land.

India today has 415 living languages. 196 of which are endangered and 9 are extinct. However the majority of these have small speech communities. While the 18 languages recognized by the constitution have large speech communities of a few crores, they do not include many languages which are equally large, like *Bhojpuri* or *Dakhni*.

The two large families popularly known as the Dravid of the South and Indo-Aryan in the North make up the majority of Indian population. There are tribal languages in the Jharkhand area and in the North East which have relatively small speech communities, from a few thousands to a few lakhs. Here only the Dravid and Indo-Aryan families will be discussed because they are the ones that are influenced by Sanskrit.

THE NOTION OF SANSKRIT AS THE MOTHER OF INDIAN LANGUAGES

The popular notion about Sanskrit is that it is the mother of all modern Indian languages. The main argument is the profusion of Sanskrit words in all Indian languages. It is also noticed that in South Indian or Dravid languages relatively more Sanskrit words occur in their original 'tatsam' (as it is) form than in the North. In the North many words acquire a 'tadbhava' (as it has become) form.

The development of modern Indian language is traced as: Sanskrit-Prakrit-Apabhraṃsh-modern languages-for both the Dravidian and Indo-Aryan language families. Although this formula is more applicable to the North Indian languages than to the South, it is taken as given.

These notions have been challenged by modern scholarship in many ways. First there is no Indian tradition of this kind of linguistic history. Secondly they have been challenged empirically too. However they not only remain popular, but are also in the text books, and many Ph.D.s on languages subscribe to these notions.

WHERE DID THIS NOTION COME FROM?

In truth, these notions do not occur in the Indian tradition. So where have they come from? They are essentially of European origin and they came through the British to India, through a new discipline called *comparative linguistics*. As Pt Kashiram Sharma says, 'In the last two hundred years, in the name of comparative linguistics, absolutely irrelevant and useless propositions and fictional accounts have been created which have poisoned the political, social and cultural environment of our country.'

It is said that comparative linguistics was born with a lecture at the inaugural function of the Asiatic Society in Bengal by a learned judge called William Jones.. William Jones was a judge at the Supreme Court of Calcutta and had learnt Sanskrit and Persian. In 1786, in the Journal of the Asiatic Society, Sir William Jones announced that: 'The Sanscrit language, whatever its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure: more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in root of verbs and in the form of grammar (...) No philosopher could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which perhaps no longer exists.' ('*On the Hindus*', The Works of Sir William Jones, III, London 1807, 34-5)

WHERE DID WILLIAM JONES GET HIS IDEAS FROM?

There is a long European tradition of these ideas. Umberto Eco in his book *The Search for the Perfect Language* has told this story. It starts from the Bible. 'In Bible the linguistic theme is taken in a very explicit fashion, in Genesis 11:1 we are told that after the Flood, the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. 'Yet, men in their vanity conceived a desire to rival the Lord, and thus to erect a tower that would reach up to the heavens. To punish their pride and to put a stop to the construction of their tower, the Lord thought: Let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech...Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth' (Genesis 11:7,9).

It occupied the European mind to search for this original one language and one speech, the perfect language. The search for this perfect language is called the monogenetic hypothesis which assumed that all languages descended from a unique mother tongue. William Jones' hypothesis comes from this world view and the theory that Sanskrit is the mother of all Indian languages originated here, just as Latin is popularly considered as the mother of European languages.

Once launched, this comparative linguistic took its own bizarre form in the colonial context. It gave rise to colonial historiography and colonial anthropology.

First it gave birth to the Indo-European hypothesis which says that Latin, Greek, Persian and Sanskrit belong to one group and that Sanskrit was the original language of the group. It also thus claimed one root for one family - the Aryans. Thus the Aryan myth got created with tragic consequences during Hitler's regime. It created the ideal of the 'white man's burden'. Thus, Adolphe Pictet, the great linguist sang the hymn to Aryan culture: 'It is not perhaps curious to see the Aryans of Europe, after a separation of four to five thousand years, close the circle once again, reach their unknown brothers in India, dominate them, bring them the elements of a superior civilization, and then to find ancient evidence of a common origin?'

Why did these so-called Aryan languages travel? The myth of Aryan invasion to India got created. Apparently there was a famine and the Aryans in search for grass for their herds went wandering in search of greener pastures and landed in India. Not only that, waves of these invasions occurred and the later invasions pushed the earlier settlers in concentric circles, with its centre in North West, outwards to East and South and to deep jungles. Linguistic and anthropological evidence got created for all these mythologies. The excavations in the Indus Valley Civilization regions further 'proved' the Aryan invasion and even dated it!

Why did India buy all these theories when there was no Indian tradition to corroborate it? Nineteenth century Indian upper castes/classes were eager to denounce the negative aspects of Hindu religion and were ready to embrace Western Civilization. This theory was very convenient. Western civilization owed its roots to India, ancient India was great and all the ills/bad things of Hindu society were due to the Muslim invasion! This was convenient to the colonialists too. It created a Brown sahib and created the Hindu-Muslim divide.

SANSKRIT IS NOT RELATED TO ANY INDIAN LANGUAGE

The first major attack on this concept came from Rt. Rev. Albert Caldwell in 1856 when he showed that the Dravidian languages are not related to Sanskrit at all. Then it was shown that Prakrit languages were not related to Sanskrit either. Using the same logic Pt. Kashiram Sharma demonstrated that Hindi is not related to Sanskrit either. Serious linguists do not believe that any of the Indian languages are related to Sanskrit.

In the struggle between Pali and Sanskrit, that is, in the struggle between Buddhism and Hinduism during 3rd century BC to 8th century AD, Hinduism and Sanskrit won. Sanskrit became the official language of India—of the courts, of learning of the 'Shastras'. The story of how and why Hinduism and Sanskrit starting from Magadh in the North 'conquered' rest of India is a fascinating story and is still being explored by historians. But it did happen and Hinduism, with its caste system, untouchability and the power of *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti* occupied the regions from UP to Kerala and from Bengal to Gujarat. It created a stable rural society based on hierarchy of castes and occupation, on caste based exploitation and oppression, impervious to change of rulers at the state level. Brahmins and Sanskrit played the legitimising role for the rulers.

For this, learning Sanskrit became very important, just as learning English is very important today. Initially the Brahmins and the bureaucrats had to go to Takshshila to learn Sanskrit for several years. Even today in the ritual of *Yagnopavit*, (of twice born) the Batuk (learners) has to perform a ritualistic trip to Kashmir (of a few steps) to start his education. It was unrealistic for scholars and bureaucrats to do this from all over India and face that extreme cold weather, but it was the norm.

As a result, at Takshashila, the Sanskrit scholars developed wonderful methods of teaching Sanskrit to Indians. Since it was a case of 'adult learning of a foreign language', they created special learning tools, one of which was of creating the most perfect grammar in the world. In the discipline of grammar and phonetics, no author had a greater influence than Panini with his *Ashtadhyayi* (5th century AD). Now one does not need a grammar to learn one's own language, but it was very useful when learning a foreign language. They also created rules for pronunciation and it was so perfect that after two thousand years, today it is still possible to hear the same pronunciation and recitation of Sanskrit from any part of India. They created dictionaries in verse form so that scholars learnt them by heart.

Sanskrit vocabulary has penetrated many modern languages. This is due to the official status it enjoyed. It is the same as Persian vocabulary of legal terms that has come into all the Indian languages, and in modern times, English words have entered Indian languages. Today any FM radio bears eloquent testimony to this. With the arrival of Islam and Sufism, social changes occurred at a faster rate in the North and influence of Sanskrit decreased rapidly. In the South the influence of Sanskrit remained stronger and that is why there are more Sanskrit *tatsam* words in the South Indian languages.

However there is another side to it. All the Sanskrit words are not from Sanskrit. Sanskrit has borrowed many words from Indian languages, Sanskritised them (gave them *Tatsam* form) and today people are made to believe that many Indian words are vulgarised (*tadbhav* form) of the original Sanskrit word. English too has borrowed thousands of words from India. In fact there is a dictionary of these words called 'Hobson Jobson'. It is possible to create a similar dictionary of Sanskrit words borrowed from Indian languages. Fr. Caldwell provided long lists of such Tamil words. For example: Amba (mother), Atavi (forest), Neer (water) Pattan (town), Palli (village) Meen (fish) Shav (dead body) and so on. Other scholars have done similar works with other Indian languages.

THE FUTURE OF SANSKRIT

D D Kosambi once wrote that Sanskrit had literally no future since it did not have a normal future tense. Vir Bharat Talwar in 'Rassakashi' wrote that although Hindi had won the right to be the Court language in North India, it could not replace Persian words. Now English words have replaced the Persian words. It is not possible to go back in time. Dharma Vir wrote in 'Hindi Ki Atrna', that a language absorbs those foreign words that suit its nature or genius. He gave the classic example of 'Table Kursi', where 'table' got absorbed in Hindi but not the 'chair'! Modern Indian languages have definitely replaced both Sanskrit and Persian and have absorbed Sanskrit, Persian and English words according to their nature.

Sanskrit will remain as a language of ritual to some upper caste Indians and a language for scholars of linguistics. Some experts opine that it may be useful for computer programming. The Backus-Naur

Form or BNF grammars used to describe modern programming languages have significant similarities with Panini's grammar rules. Great libraries will have Sanskrit classics available for serious students.

The terms Dravidian and Indo-Aryan families do not occur in Indian tradition. They have been introduced by the linguistics developed in the colonial era. So do these language families have any validity? Why and how have these concepts got created?

Comparative linguistics gave birth to the Indo-European hypothesis which says that Latin, Greek, Persian and Sanskrit belong to one group and that Sanskrit was the original language of the group. It also thus claimed as one root for one family—the Aryans. Thus the Aryan myth got created and Indian languages were called Indo-Aryan languages.

After Caldwell established that the Dravidian languages are not related, the idea of two groups evolved. The North Indian languages were called Indo-Aryan and the South Indian group was called Dravidian. However, scholars show that the so-called Indo Aryan languages are not related to Sanskrit either. So it leads to explore the possibility that the notion of two large groups—Dravidian and Indo Aryan is false.

INDIAN LANGUAGES FORM ONE FAMILY

It was Pandit Kashiram Sharma who proposed that in fact all Indian languages form one family. He published a booklet called: *Dravid Parivar ki Bhasha: Hindi*, (Hindi: a language of Dravid Family) from Roorkee in 1968. The provocation for publishing and distributing this pamphlet is also interesting. "I will never forget an incident I saw in Roorkee in 1967. The Angrezi hatao (Remove English) movement burnt 'Gandhi Vastra Bhandar' because its name was written in Devanagari and Roman. However the 'Motel Polaris' got saved because they changed the name plate to Devanagari over night!"

What is the basis to argue that in fact Indian languages form one family? The Dravid and the Indo-Aryan families share a lot:

1. They are in one large geographical contiguous area bounded by the seas, the Indus river system, the Himalayas and the river Brahmaputra.
2. There is a 'morph by morph' equivalence between these languages. That is if you write the same sentence in the two languages one below the other they will match vertically. In other words the sentence structure is similar in all these languages.
3. There is a 'Dravidian sub stratum' in all these languages.
4. There is an overlay of Sanskrit vocabulary in all these languages, particularly in the written form and spoken by the upper castes/classes.
5. The ease with which Khari boli and Braj spread all over India: Braj spread in the medieval period, due to the Krishna Bhakti and Vaishnavism, to the East and even to South India. Khari Boli also spread from the 12th century onwards up to Tungabhadra in the South, due to the Sufis and Nirgun saints. In the South it became known as Dakhni. Later variants of Bombay Hindi and Calcutta Hindi also came into being during the colonial period. Similarly, the Dravidian languages, numbering 29, extend as far north as Jharkhand (the Oraon language) Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh (Gond languages) and even in the North West beyond the Indus river system (The Brahui language).
6. The scripts of all Indian languages are syllabic in nature and the order of the letters in the scripts is same with a few regional variations.
7. The Indian Standard Sign Language: Sign language is a language used by deaf people to communicate with each other with the help of signs made by hand. In theory each language or speech community has its own separate sign language. In other words there can be as many sign languages as there are languages. However this is not practical for purposes of teaching. So normally a family of languages evolve a common sign language. As we have tried to argue above, Indian languages as a whole form one family, so it is no surprise that people working with deaf people have in fact evolved a standard Indian sign language. This is one more 'proof to indicate that Indian

languages form one common family and their division between Dravidian and Indo Aryan may not be correct.

Different languages are born in different eco regions. Malwa has Malwi, Awadh has Awadhi or Mithila has Maithili. Different forms of Marathi, Telugu or Kannada exist in different regions. If they share a larger eco region a family of language gets created. Thus Hindi is a set of some 30 languages or Marathi is of 6. Similarly India, as we defined it ecologically and linguistically has one large group or family of modern Indian languages.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Local languages can be superimposed by a ruling language. In case of India they have all been 'foreign'. First it was Sanskrit, then Persian and now English. Is there something special about Indian people or the Indian climate that they are ruled by foreigners or at least by foreign languages? Such a colonial idea has been around for quite some time and was eloquently expressed in the book, *The Continent of Circe* by Nirad Chaudhuri.

In fact India twice had an Indian language as a ruling/national language. First it was Pali. It remained from the time of Ashok to 9th century or so - more than 1000 years! Secondly today officially Hindi is India's national language although in fact English has taken over. Why did Hindi fail? Among others, one of the reasons was that its proponents subscribed to the Sanskrit origin theory and filled it with Sanskrit words and used Sanskrit grammar to teach it! However, Hindi in its various popular forms remains the link language in India.

Another way of looking at it is that India is a federal entity and it is artificial (imperial) to have one common language. In fact these imperial periods have been of relatively short durations but their linguistic impact is of much longer duration. And during all these 'imperial periods' some provinces were always in a state of revolt, not excepting the present Indian state. The only difference is that in the past the revolting forces were mainly local kings or Kshatras (though there were exceptions), whereas today a large number of people are involved in these revolts against the centre.

The rest depends on the political course that India will take in coming decades. If the centralised Indian state remains, English will dominate. If it breaks into federal units, modern Indian languages will take over with appropriate absorption of Sanskrit, Persian and English language words as well as words from each other. There may even be a move to de-Sanskritise the languages and to discover very good local words of lower caste/working class origin. This has happened before. In Kannada the great poet D R Bendre discovered and used many original Kannada words in his poems. Similar things have happened in many Indian languages. One can only hope that this will not give rise to a new kind of chauvinism/fascism like the Shiv Sena or Kannada Abhimanis.

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