The Return of Sanskrit

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NEW DELHI—If you look out your plane window during landing or take off at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, the view of the nearby Jawaharlal Nehru University campus can be startling. From above, you can see that the Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies building has the shape of a swastika.

Based on the Sanskrit word svastika, meaning “bringing good luck,” the swastika is an ancient symbol that looks like a cross with its four arms bent at right angles. For at least the past two and half millennia, Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists have considered the sign auspicious. But in the 1920s, the National Socialist Party in Germany adopted it, rotating it to give it a diagonal orientation. Ever since, outside of Asian ritual settings, the association with Nazis has stigmatized the symbol. The two meanings of the swastika—
Recently, Sanskrit had settled into a kind of quiescence (seemingly even an obsolescence). Only in the past two to three years, with the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has Sanskrit re-entered the public imagination as part of the “culture wars” between the Hindu right and secular left.

After a decisive victory in the 2014 national elections, the BJP consolidated power and formed a majority government. The ruling party is now fighting to legitimate the two cornerstones of its interpretation of Hindu culture: caste and Sanskrit. These ideas constitute an assault on the more egalitarian, pluralist, participatory, and progressive visions of political modernity that have prevailed since India’s founding.

It is not that caste or exclusivist high culture based on Sanskrit erudition had ever died away, but India’s postcolonial leaders had managed to build a consensus that valued equal citizenship and democracy over the relics of the past. The ghosts of the caste system and of Sanskrit have now returned to haunt the Indian polity.

In this environment, it is important to understand what sort of object Sanskrit is, why we should care so much about it today, and why it’s so crucial to resist the BJP’s manipulation of this ancient language.

**THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST**

All travelers, immigrants, imperialists, invaders, and seekers of salvation or wealth who have ever come to India, from Alexander the Great in the 3rd century B.C. to American hippies of the 1960s, have encountered the enigma of Sanskrit. The language has something in common with Latin and Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, Persian and Chinese, Hittite and Aramaic,

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Turkish and Japanese, Tamil and Tibetan, and a few other great languages of the pre-modern world, in that we associate it with revelation, scripture, and ritual; with culture and civilization; indeed, with the very origins of linguistic communication among humans.

Yet Sanskrit is also different from its peers, because unlike some of the other classical languages, it has neither disappeared nor been reborn as a modern language used by any nation, region, or people (unlike Chinese, Persian, Arabic, Greek, or Hebrew). It is the only classical language that has extraordinary political valence today, despite only being used in limited and specialized contexts.

The Hindu nationalists that rule India rest much of their agenda of religious revivalism and cultural pride on the age and prestige of Sanskrit, which emerged “out of the myth smoke” (in the evocative words of the historian of India, John Keay) some 3,500 years ago. The Hindu Right, however, thinks nothing of dialing back its origins many thousands of years before this. The point is to prove that Hinduism pre-dates not only all of the Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) but also all other Indic religions (Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism).

Moreover, in the Hindu Right’s view, Sanskrit is not only India’s essential language of belief but also its once and future language of science. In this nativist project, Sanskrit takes precedence over Hindi, English, Tamil, Persian, Pali, or any other contenders whether ancient, medieval, or modern as the one language that represents and embodies Indian civilization.

Pushing back against this insistence on the centrality of Sanskrit are Indian secularists (for whom the language’s overwhelmingly Hindu baggage weighs it down), liberals (who are uncomfortable with its non-modern provenance), leftists (who object to the ideologies of social inequality embedded in Sanskrit texts), feminists (who deem it a repository of patriarchal values), and Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables, who see Sanskrit as inseparable from the caste system, the language of Brahmin domination over the rest of Hindu society).

Even many of those who know and appreciate the Sanskrit corpus for the wealth of its knowledge systems, the aesthetics of its literary genres, the beauty of its poetry, the brilliance of its thought, the regularity of its grammar, and the profundity of its insights have a hard time defending it against the charges leveled by its many detractors.

**HINDI NATIONALIST AGENDAS ARE BEING TRANSLATED INTO CONCRETE POLICY FRAMEWORKS.**

The first modern critic of Sanskrit as the font of ideologies of social inequality and Brahmin domination was Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), the leader of India’s Dalits. When Ambedkar was a young student, he was denied the opportunity to study Sanskrit at school or university, thanks to his outcaste status. He later responded by aggressively teaching himself not just Sanskrit but also Pali, the language of ancient Buddhism.

When Ambedkar oversaw the drafting of the Indian Constitution, which was promulgated in 1950, he argued that eliminating caste hierarchy, abolishing untouchability, and establishing equal citizenship were the prerequisites of democracy. In the last year of his life, 1956, he inaugurated a sect of neo-Buddhism and declared himself no longer a Hindu. Ambedkar converted his Brahmin wife and close
to half a million Dalits, recalling the first revolt against Vedic religion and Hindu caste society by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, two and a half millennia ago.

In our own times, Sheldon Pollock, 69, professor of Sanskrit at Columbia University, has consistently pointed out that regardless of the intellectual, philosophical, artistic, or religious value that may be retrieved from the texts and practices of Sanskrit, its complicity with conservative, patriarchal, and unequal ideas of social order cannot simply be set aside.

Pollock has developed a thesis of “critical philology” that departs from both the age-old knowledge practices of Sanskrit pundits in India and the Orientalist biases of Western Indology. Philology—in Pollock’s redefinition of this discipline—requires the study of texts in their social contexts. By this he means both the contexts of their production, which lie in pre-modern times, and the contexts of their reception, which include the modern day.

Pollock believes that a text must be studied along three axes of interpretation: authorial intention, traditions of reading, and the assumptions and expectations of the present moment in which the text is once again received. Without these complex interpretive parameters, he argues, a text can be neither read responsibly nor understood fully.

Naturally, critical philology challenges the claims of Sanskrit’s ahistorical perfection. For Hindu nationalists, even the etymology of the word Sanskrit—which comes from sanskṛta, meaning “perfectly constructed”—suggests its timeless authority. Pollock, on the contrary, argues that both texts and textual meanings are the work of human minds and therefore inescapably situated in human society.

In recent years, Pollock has supported a number of campaigns to preserve and augment the freedom of expression and civil liberties in India, including a massive protest against the banning of two books on Hindus and Hinduism by his erstwhile colleague, the University of Chicago religion professor Wendy Doniger. In the spring of 2016, he publicly advocated for graduate students at JNU when they asserted their right to dissent against government policies and found themselves evicted from their hostels, prohibited from continuing their doctoral research programs, and, in some cases, thrown in jail without trial for their allegedly “anti-national” activities.

Back in the U.S., Pollock used a personal grant and award monies to institute a scholarship named after Ambedkar to sponsor a Dalit student from India and fund his or her graduate coursework in South Asian studies at Columbia—where, from 1913 to 1916, Ambedkar himself had studied for an M.A. and Ph.D., the first Dalit to do so.

Pollock’s efforts to democratize the world of classical Indic scholarship, desacralize Sanskrit, and bring expertise on premodern India to bear on our understanding of modern India have generated a storm of controversy. After he spoke out in support of JNU’s beleaguered students, right-wing “culture warriors” of the BJP and their troll armies launched an aggressive campaign this spring to remove Pollock from the general editorship of the Murty Classical Library of India, published by Harvard University Press. To their consternation, however, the publisher of HUP and sponsor of the MCLI, Rohan Narayana Murty ruled out any plans to unseat him.

THE COSMOPOLITANISM OF SANSKRIT

Apart from its powerful connotations of caste-based inequality, Sanskrit texts are also deeply, perhaps irremediably, patriarchal in their social ideology. Add to this the BJP’s insistence that Sanskrit symbolizes the greatness of Hindu civilization exclusively—thereby marginalizing the equally significant Islamic aspects of Indian history and culture. At the same time the government is promoting Sanskrit, it has been sideling the study of Urdu and Persian, the
modern and classical languages, respectively, of “Muslim” India.

New scholarship, much of it undertaken by colleagues, students, and research collaborators of Pollock, shows that there were rich linkages between Sanskrit and Persian literati, and that intellectual exchange and translation across these languages and their respective knowledge systems flourished at the Mughal Court as well as other Muslim kingdoms in medieval India.

Despite the serious criticisms leveled against it, from Ambedkar to Pollock, no one has suggested that Sanskrit should or could be abandoned entirely. We cannot write the history of any of the major world religions that arose on the Indian subcontinent—including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—without it. Sankrit’s texts, vocabularies, concepts, and theories permeate these systems and pervade the many other languages in which Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh thought come down to us: Pali, Prakrit, Tibetan, Braj Bhasha, and Punjabi, to name just a few. Not even Islam and Christianity in India are untouched by Sanskrit, through translation, dialogue, and syncretistic flows across cultures.

Many Sanskrit words—Om and Namaste, karma and avatar, guru and dharma, Brahmin and pundit—have been naturalized into English and are recognized around the world. Yoga and Ayurveda originated in hoary Sanskrit texts, but are now integrated into globalized understandings of “alternative” medicine and self-care.

THE CULTURAL BATTLEFIELD

Since Modi came to power, the BJP government has made Sanskrit a key component of its goal to recast the secular Republic of India as the “Hindu Rashtra”—a nation for, of, and by Hindus alone, to the exclusion of Indians with other religious identities.

The BJP instituted June 21 (summer solstice) as “International Yoga Day,” and renamed Teachers’ Day “Guru Utsav”—literally “Festival of the Guru,” a name with strong Hindu connotations. Teachers and students are expected to celebrate this festival with a religious fervor unknown to previous generations of Indians.

There are newly revised national policies on education, languages, and textbooks either being drafted or recently put on the table. At this point, it appears a major rightward shift in all these areas is unavoidable. Hindu nationalist agendas are being translated into concrete policy frameworks. Secular identities and social inclusion are bound to be reined in.

Most significantly, the government wants Sanskrit to be showcased as a language of teaching, learning, and research at the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), India’s apex institu-
papers by Fields Medal winners and Nobel laureates, had a presentation claiming that Indians had built airplanes some 7,000 years before the Wright brothers.

Introducing “Yoga Day” and “Guru Day” to the official national calendar, funding three new Sanskrit universities, and implementing Sanskrit language teaching at the IITs should all be seen as parts of BJP’s strategy to normalize majoritarian religious culture in civil and secular institutions.

Scholars—particularly Sanskrit philologists, linguists, and historians of pre-modern India—need to remain vigilant about changes at the level of textbooks, institutional policy, public discourse, and symbols of the state. The promotion and preservation of Sanskrit and its knowledge systems and texts is important, but its political meanings cannot be dissociated from the ideological agenda of a Hindu nationalist government.

Today Sanskrit has come out of the ivory tower and descended onto the cultural battlefield. It’s time that scholars and academics did the same.