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# *Sanskrit for the Nation*

SUMATHI RAMASWAMY

*University of Pennsylvania*

. . . the people of India love and venerate Sanskrit with a feeling which is next only to that of patriotism towards Mother India.

*Report of the Sanskrit Commission, 1956–57*

## Language in the Regimes of the Nation

This essay raises the language question in its relationship to the wider problematic of the nationalization of pasts by focusing on the curious and puzzling status accorded to Sanskrit in the nationalization of the Indian past in this century. I use the words 'curious' and 'puzzling' deliberately, for the Sanskrit issue unsettles many well-entrenched assumptions about language and nationalism that circulate in scholarly circles and popular imagination. Just as crucially, Sanskrit's (mis)adventures in the past century or so, draw our attention to the troubling linguistic turns taken by the nationalization process in India with its disquieting complicity with colonial categories and certitudes. The concerns of this paper have thus been shaped by three related issues pertaining to language, nationalism, and modernity.

First, since at least the 1950s, the Government of India has invested an unusual amount of energy and time, not to speak of money, in regulating Sanskrit through creating supervisory agencies, inaugurating new centers of Sanskritic learning, and reopening old ones. It has also financed publications, cultural events, and radio (and more recently, television) broadcasts for nation-wide consumption, all centered around the promotion of the language. The state's

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Sanskrit policy (if we may call it that) was forged by the Sanskrit Commission which was set up in 1956, and which in turn derived its authority from the Constitution of India. While much of this essay examines the remarkable report issued by this Commission, and considers some of its implications for independent India's linguistic politics, this examination itself is provoked by the following question: what can we say about the modernity of the Indian nation that it needs the crutches of an ancient language, a language that many argue is known to few of its citizens and spoken by a mere handful? Existing theories of language and nationalism, themselves largely based on the normative western European experience, would have us think that the very emergence of the nation-state leads to a jettisoning of archaic 'classical' languages from positions of prestige, profit and power, and to the empowering of the modern 'vernacular' that is deemed to be spoken by a majority of its citizens—their 'mother tongue'—as the 'national' language. Yet in India, the demand which has periodically surfaced over the past century for instituting Sanskrit as the national language has been couched in exactly the opposite terms. Sanskrit deserves this status in the view of its advocates precisely because it is the most ancient language of the nation, and precisely because it is nobody's 'mother tongue'. Does this demand therefore amount to a rejection of a 'western' model of the nation imagined around a modern spoken language, or is it a reflection of the Orientalist and colonial inflections of the Indian nation? Or does it suggest an alternate imagination about the place of language in nation and modernity?

Second, and following from this first set of questions, what is the fate of ancient languages which get entangled in the regimes of the modern nation-state? To date, some of the more interesting work on this subject has been done on Hebrew whose relationship to Israeli and Jewish nationalism shows some fascinating parallels with the place of Sanskrit in Indian and Hindu nationalism. Robert Alter has argued that the 'normalization' of Hebrew in modern Israel under the 'ideological impulse' of Israeli nationalism necessitated the secularization of what had hitherto been the 'holy tongue' of Jews and its transformation from a 'dead' liturgical and literary language into a spoken medium. This process also fostered a 'ruthlessness' towards non-Hebraic, especially Yiddish, manifestations in Israeli national culture.[1] His work reminds us that the

[1] Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington, 1994).

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nationalization of a language, ancient or otherwise, does not merely involve the standardization of its linguistic forms, vocabularies and meanings; just as significantly, or perhaps more so, it also calls for a standardization (and sanitization) of cultural notions about the language that have gathered through time. In other words, the nationalization of language is never just a linguistic or grammatical project, but is always an ideological one in which old assumptions have to be rethought or discarded, and new meanings assigned to enable the national project at hand. As we shall see, Sanskrit is made to take on new meanings—and abandon some old ones—in relationship not just to its own past, but to the past(s) of the nation, its languages and their speakers. To anticipate one of the fundamental contentions of this paper, I will suggest that the nationalization of Sanskrit transforms it into a metonym of the nation, as voiced in the formulation 'Sanskrit is India'.[2] Here, a putative whole that is 'India' is reduced metonymically to one of its constitutive parts, namely, Sanskrit. The part comes to stand for the whole through erasure or absorption of other parts that make up the whole. So, the pasts associated with other languages which have arguably played comparable roles (Pali, Tamil, Persian, etc.) are excluded or subordinated to a past constituted around Sanskrit that is renamed as the nation's past. Yet, the phrase 'Sanskrit is India' may also be read as a synecdoche in which Sanskrit is assigned the capacity to represent all of India. Indeed, the nationalizers of Sanskrit would like us to believe that the language is not just one part of a whole that is 'India', or even its most important part, but that it is constitutive of *every* part that makes up the whole. As we shall see, the Sanskrit Commission took on that much-touted nationalist slogan 'unity in diversity', and insisted that it is Sanskrit that brought a 'remarkable unity' to India's 'bewildering diversity'. In the words of the Commission, 'we can never insist too strongly on this signal fact that Sanskrit has been the Great Unifying Force of India, and that India with its nearly 400 millions of people [*sic*] is One Country, and not half or dozen or more countries, *only because of Sanskrit*'.[3] In this view, Sanskrit transforms the many into One: it gives lie to the apparent heterogeneity of the nation by reminding

[2] Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *India: A Polyglot Nation and its Linguistic Problems vis-a-vis National Integration* (Bombay, 1974), p. 32.

[3] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission, 1956–57* (Delhi, 1958), pp. 80–1 (emphasis mine).

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modern Indians, and the world at large, that underneath all that 'bewildering diversity', India is really One.

Third and finally, this paper takes its cue from Sheldon Pollock's stimulating essay, 'The language of the gods in the world of men', in which he rightly underscores the urgent need for a social history of Sanskrit. Such a social history, Pollock writes, ought to consider 'the ideological constraints that from an early period shaped its discourse'; chart 'the changing domains of usage and learning to hear the new speakers who find a voice in Sanskrit'; and above all, critically detail '*what it has meant in history to appropriate Sanskrit*'.[4] My paper considers only a very thin slice of the much larger discourse of power that has gathered around the language over the centuries, even while suggesting that a social history of Sanskrit along the lines proposed by Pollock has necessarily to bring in the present, and the efforts to nationalize the language in this century. This nationalization, I propose, has shaped our understanding of not just the pre-national history of the language, but of India's many pasts as well, in ways which we are just beginning to appreciate.[5] Further, recent attempts by Hindu nationalist groups to re-empower the language at the very least underscore the importance of learning more about what is going on with Sanskrit in independent India.[6] Yet, because the language has come to be so indelibly identified with India's antiquity and distant past, there are few serious studies of Sanskrit's intense, albeit troubled, participation in its modernity.[7] And so, this essay sets out to make a beginning in this direction.

[4] Sheldon Pollock, 'The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Reflections on Sanskrit in History' (unpublished manuscript, Inaugural Lecture, University of Chicago, 1990, emphasis mine). See also Sheldon Pollock, 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology', in Jan E. M. Houben (ed.), *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 197–247.

[5] Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1993).

[6] Sukumari Bhattacharji, 'New Education Policy and Sanskrit', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1990, 25(48–49): 2641–2; Robert Goldman, 'The Communalization of Sanskrit and the Sanskritization of Communalism' (unpublished paper, 1993). Corstiaan J. G. van der Burg, 'The Place of Sanskrit in Neo-Hindu Ideology: From Religious Reform to National Awakening', in Houben (ed.), *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, pp. 375–8.

[7] For some recent attempts to consider this issue, see especially essays by Victor van Bijlert, Corstiaan van der Burg, and Saroj Bhate in Houben (ed.), *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*.

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## Sanskrit and Modernity

In October 1956, amidst the turmoil of the States Reorganization debates and the creation of linguistic states, the Government of India decided to appoint a commission to evaluate the state of Sanskrit in the nation. The ostensible reason for creating the Sanskrit Commission was pedagogical. Over the past decade, a number of government commissions investigating education and language issues—the University Education Commission (1948–49) chaired by S. Radhakrishnan, the Secondary School Education Commission (1952–53) under A. Lakshmanaswami Mudaliar, and the Official Language Commission (1955–56) chaired by B. G. Kher—had proclaimed their faith in the value of Sanskrit education for the Indian citizenry.[8] Sanskrit and its literature, it was pointed out, 'have served throughout these centuries not only as the reservoir of ideas, sentiments, and parables to be drawn upon freely by all for the embellishment of their literary output, but also as benchmarks of literary excellence, as standards for social conduct, as exemplars of morality, and in short, as the repository of wit and wisdom of all the Indian peoples throughout the ages'.[9] Understandably, therefore, much concern was voiced by these Commissions over a perceived deterioration in Sanskritic learning which, it was feared, would eventually lead to the extinction of the language, if the government did not step in and prevent a national disaster.

The Government's response was to set up the Sanskrit Commission under the chairmanship of the renowned linguist, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, who was to be aided in his task by seven established Sanskritists who included V. Raghavan of the University of Madras, R. N. Dandekar from the University of Poona, and S. K. De of Jadavpur University in Calcutta.[10] The official mandate of the San-

[8] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 3–4.

[9] *Report of the Official Language Commission* (New Delhi, 1957), p. 249.

[10] Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1890–1977), best known for his numerous publications in comparative philology and historical linguistics of Indian languages, was Professor of Indian Linguistics and Phonetics in the University of Calcutta (1922–52). He was elected to the West Bengal Legislative Council in which he served until 1964 when he resigned to take up his appointment as the National Professor of India in the Humanities. In addition to serving as chair of the Sanskrit Commission in 1956–57, he was also a member of the Official Language Commission appointed by the Government of India in 1955–56. His position on the official language question varied over time. In 1943, he conceded that 'Hindi (Hindustani) alone has the greatest claim to be [the] national language', although he also did not fail to insist

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skrit Commission was 'to undertake a survey of the existing facilities for Sanskrit education . . .; to make proposals for promoting the study of Sanskrit; [and] to examine the traditional system of Sanskrit Education in order to find out what features from it could be usefully incorporated into the modern system'.[11] It is clear, however, from the report submitted by the Commission a year later in November 1957, that it saw its task as being more than just pedagogical, for at stake was the very survival of the emergent nation. The Commission was fiercely anxious about 'the growing fissiparous tendencies and linguistic parochialism which are jeopardising the political unity of the country and are rocking the very foundations of our freedom'.[12] A decade of linguistic jealousy and bitterness had marred the joys of independence; there had been much squabbling within the nation over state boundaries and territories; and Hindi, the proposed official language of India, had been found unacceptable by large numbers of its people. Everywhere, 'regionalism' and 'linguism' were on the rise.

The Commission's solution to these problems was clear-cut: to put Indians on a good and steady diet of Sanskrit by making its study compulsory in schools, and by instituting it as the official language of the nation. Sanskrit was ideally suited for this role, for it was the 'Supreme Unifier' (p. 201) and the 'Great Unifying Force' (p. 81). 'The Indian people and the Indian civilization were born . . . in the

that if there were only Hindus in India, Sanskrit would continue to play its role as link language as it had for thirty centuries (Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Languages and the Linguistic Problem* (London, 1943), p. 23). By 1956, he had become less enthusiastic about Hindi, and even appended 'a note of dissent' to the Report of the Official Language Commission in which he expressed concern over what he characterized as 'Hindi imperialism'; called for a retention of English; and suggested that if there was need to have an Indian language as a symbol of Indian unity, 'we should not forget the overwhelming claims of Sanskrit in this matter' (*Report of the Official Language Commission*, pp. 271–314). In 1974, in a 'rethinking' of the language question, he proposed that Sanskrit, English and Hindi be all recognized as 'union languages' (Chatterjee, *India*, pp. 62–6). V. Raghavan (1908–79) has been much more consistent and open, at least in print, in his support of Sanskrit as the official language, reluctantly conceding that if this could not come to pass, only a Sanskritized Hindi would be acceptable (V. Raghavan, *Sanskrit: Essays on the Value of the Language and the Literature* (Madras, 1972), pp. 15–23). Raghavan, a widely-published Sanskrit scholar, joined the Sanskrit faculty of the University of Madras in 1935, and became professor and head of its Sanskrit department in 1955. In addition to serving in the Sanskrit Commission, he went on to become member of the Central Sanskrit Board, and was Chairman of the Central Sanskrit Institute, Tirupati. For biographical details on De and Dandekar, see N. R. Ray (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Calcutta, 1986), pp. 274–6, 320–1.

[11] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 284.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 201.

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lap of Sanskrit' (p. 85). It is 'in our blood' (p. 81). It is 'the breath of our nostrils and the light of our eyes' (p. 87). Mixing its metaphors, the Commission also variously described Sanskrit as 'the bedrock' of Indian existence, the 'main thread which runs through the entire fabric of the cultural life of an Indian' (p. 102), and the anchor that keeps the youth of India from losing their 'cultural moorings' (p. 51). 'If the binding force of Sanskrit [is] taken away, the people of India would cease to feel that they were parts of a single culture and a single nation' (p. 70). So, by restoring Sanskrit back to its citizens, the nation, too, would be restored, and its troubled waters calmed. For Sanskrit, it was declared, brings a 'symphony to our life' (p. 84).

The Sanskrit Commission was not the first to propose the candidacy of the language for the troubled role of independent India's *lingua franca*, or to offer it as panacea for the nation's many teething problems. The Sanskritization of culture that is such a hallmark of India's modernity in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, inevitably also meant the (re)Sanskritization of its languages. In the production of grammars, the standardization of dialects, the creation of new and 'modern' vocabularies for use in schools, courts and offices, and in the attempts to write the histories of these languages, Sanskrit and its literature invariably provided the model (although, as has been demonstrated for many regions, not without contention from alternate standards offered by Persian, Tamil and even English). Given the importance that Sanskrit had already assumed in the revamping of so many Indian languages, it is perhaps not surprising that in the later decades of the nineteenth century and sporadically in the early decades of the twentieth as well, it came to be also seen as a solution to what was increasingly being envisioned as a 'problem'. If India had to function as a nation, it had to have a 'national' language, for is this not what the historical experience of Europe suggested? In the writings of several leading intellectuals, and in the pages of literary journals and newsmagazines such as *The Calcutta Review, Indian Mirror*, and *The Theosophist*, Sanskrit was a popular candidate, although it did have powerful rivals in Hindi-Hindustani and English.[13] Repeatedly identified as

[13] Bruce McCully, *English Education and Origins of Indian Nationalism* (New York, 1940), pp. 254–57; Victor A. van Biljert, 'Sanskrit and Hindu National Identity in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in Houben (ed.), *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, pp. 347–66; van der Burg, 'The Place of Sanskrit in Neo-Hindu Ideology'; K. Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905–1944* (Madurai, 1980),

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the 'Aryan language', Sanskrit held the key to the 'national regeneration' of (Hindu Aryan) India. So, in an 1879-essay entitled 'Should we call ourselves Aryas?', A. Mittra wrote:

> Resolve solemnly to devote at least a couple of hours daily to the study of Sanskrit. Unite and strive for the general diffusion of Sanskrit learning. Let Aryan words and Aryan thoughts be far more familiar to your tongue and heart than English is at present . . . can we who have not even a smattering of the Aryan tongue honestly claim the denomination of Arya? Is it not a painful, a shameful necessity that compels me, at the present moment to advocate the cause of Aryan learning in a foreign tongue? Should not the Sanskrit rather than the English be the universal medium of communication in the Aryan land?[14]

In turn, this identification of Sanskrit as 'the universal medium of communication' echoed pronouncements in numerous colonial narratives from almost the beginning of British rule in India. For those colonials who supported the cause of Oriental learning and the opening of Sanskrit colleges, '[t]he acquisition of Sanskrit is indispensable not only for the study of the classical books composed in that language but principally as the mother-language of a great number of Indian dialects . . . It is true and obvious that a true and radical reform of a nation in learning and morality (which is the object of a good Government) will begin and proceed with the improvement of their own national language'. Sanskrit was routinely declared to be the 'root' of all other Indian languages, and 'the grand reservoir of [their] strength and beauty'.[15] Some, like Charles Wilkins and Monier Monier-Williams, even advised colonial administrators and missionaries that the absence of knowledge of any of the spoken languages of India could be compensated for by learning Sanskrit.[16] With it, they 'will be at home in every corner of our vast

pp. 186, 201. The dramatic increase in Sanskrit and Sanskritized Hindi books in many parts of north India offers further proof of this renewed interest in Sanskrit in the late colonial period (on this, see Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (Bombay, 1994), pp. 37–47).

[14] Quoted in McCully, *English Education*, p.257.

[15] Quoted in *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 18. For Europe's discovery of Sanskrit and enchantment with it, see Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Discovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (New York, 1974); Rosane Rocher, 'Sanskrit: Discovery by Europeans', in R. A. Asher, *et al*. (eds), *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (New York, 1994), pp. 3651–4.

[16] For the linguistic training of colonial officials and study of Sanskrit at the College at Fort William and in Haileybury, see Bernard S. Cohn, 'Recruitment and Training of British Civil Servants in India, 1600–1860', in Ralph Briabanti (ed.), *Asian Bureaucratic Systems Emergent from the British Imperial Tradition* (Durham, 1966), pp. 111–28. Sanskrit was the only 'Oriental' language that students at Haileybury

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Indian territories . . .' It was 'the best general language . . . for those destined for an Indian life', and would stand them in good stead even if they 'were ignorant of the particular locality in which their lot may be cast . . .'[17]

Not surprisingly, the Sanskrit Commission quoted with approval such references from the colonial archive which substantiated its own contention that Sanskrit was the only genuinely 'all-India' language that was known in every nook and corner of the nation. Additionally, it offered a list of famous nationalists (many of whom we would today identify as ideologically neo-Hindu) who had supported the cause of Sanskrit, and had even learnt the language, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Annie Besant being prominent among those enumerated.[18] It had a more difficult time with Gandhi

were required to pass, notwithstanding the increasing realization that it was as useful for anyone actually serving in India 'as a knowledge of ancient German would be to an English Commissioner of Police' (quoted in Cohn, 'Recruitment and Training', p. 124).

[17] Monier Monier-Williams, *The Study of Sanskrit in Relation to Missionary Work in India* (Oxford, 1861), pp. 41–6. In his later years, 'even Monier-Williams . . . doubted its value as a compulsory subject' (Cohn, 'Recruitment and Training', p. 124). Nevertheless, nearly a century later, the Sanskrit Commission revived the recommendations of Monier-Williams and other colonial advocates of Sanskrit. It proposed that officers of the prestigious Indian Administrative Service should be taught Sanskrit, for a knowledge of the language 'would enable them to appreciate the deeper vein in the life and culture of the people under their charge, and at the same time bring in a touch of a great humanistic tradition in their mental make-up' (*Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 203).

[18] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 21. The Commission was careful to point out that these nationalists had contributed to the 'cultural revival of the country and the growth of interest in Sanskrit classics with which such reawakening was intimately connected'. And yet it is important to remember that the admiration for Sanskrit thus expressed clearly produced a 'Hindi', 'Aryan', even a 'Brahmanical', revival, masquerading as 'Indian' regeneration. Dayananda abandoned his early dependence on Sanskrit in favor of Hindi for preaching and proselytizing by the early 1870s, but it continued to be crucial to the Arya Samaj's vision of Hindu/Aryan society in the 1880s and 1890s. In spite of some early controversy over its inclusion in the curriculum, Sanskrit continued to be an important part of Arya Samaj pedagogy well into this century, and from the outset, it was cast in opposition to Urdu/Arabic/Islam (Kenneth Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-century Punjab* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 69–70, 90–1, 226). In the Madras Presidency, under the auspices of the Theosophical Society (whose clientele was mostly Brahman and upper caste), Sanskrit schools were opened in many big cities as well as smaller towns in the 1880s, and many local Theosophists sent their children to these before sending them on to the English-medium schools. Henry Olcott even had plans for a grand 'national Sanskrit movement' that would assist in the teaching of the 'first principles of [the] national religion' (R. Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1852–1891* (Tucson, 1974), p. 303). For Vivekananda, as well, it was Sanskrit that gave 'prestige' and 'power' to the Hindu 'race'. While he

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and Nehru, both of whom had passed over Sanskrit in favor of Hindustani as the national language. But even here, the Commission reminded its interlocutors that Gandhi had declared that, if only to read the *Bhagavad Gita*, one ought to learn Sanskrit.[19] And Nehru, it was recalled, had confessed:

> If I was asked what is the greatest treasure which India possesses and what is her finest heritage, I would answer unhesitatingly—it is the Sanskrit language and literature, and all that it contains. This is a magnificent inheritance, and so long as this endures and influences the life of our people, so long the basic genius of India will continue.[20]

conceded that the 'vernaculars' should be used for the general education of the masses, it was through Sanskrit that they would learn 'culture'. Without this, the masses would remain 'like savages'. He called upon the lower castes to stop fighting the higher castes in vain; instead, they could bring about a leveling of the caste system through learning the culture of the upper castes and 'raising [their] condition through a study of Sanskrit'. They could all become Brahman and Arya through appropriating Sanskrit, he suggested (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 3* (Calcutta, 1973), pp. 290–3). Of course, much more systematic work needs to be done on the revival of Sanskrit within the context of Indian nationalism, but for some recent beginnings in this direction, see van Biljert, 'Sanskrit and Hindu National Identity'; and van der Burg, 'The Place of Sanskrit in Neo-Hindu Ideology'.

[19] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 22. Gandhi's position on Sanskrit was not without its share of contradictions. While in the North, he vehemently opposed the increased Sanskritization of Hindi which distanced it from Hindustani/Urdu, and alienated Muslims, in the South, he backed the cause of 'Hindi' as the national language precisely because, in his opinion, it contained a large number of Sanskrit words which would already be familiar to the speakers of South Indian languages. 'It is a matter of history that contact in the old days between the South and the North used to be maintained by means of Sanskrit' (Mohandas Gandhi, *Our Language Problem* (Karachi, 1942), pp. 18–19, 33–4). Elsewhere, he declared that the southern languages were 'daughters of Sanskrit': '. . . they have a large number of Sanskrit words in their vocabulary and when they are in difficulty, they go to Sanskrit as to a mother—they seek her help and receive from her in the form of new words their requisite nourishment' (Mohandas Gandhi, *Evil Wrought by the English Medium* (Ahmedabad, 1958), p. 47). So much so that he claimed that he found it possible to understand the gist of what was being said in all four south Indian languages because of a shared Sanskrit vocabulary, and wrote that because of this, even though he was 67 years old he felt that he could learn Kannada, for instance, in eight days (*Our Language Problem*, p. 18). Although he would have liked all Indians to know both the Urdu and Nagari scripts, in the end, he was in favor of the latter, for all Indian languages were in one capacity or another 'daughters of Sanskrit, by birth and adoption'. He even suggested that the Nagari script ought to be made compulsory for all Hindus (*Our Language Problem*, pp. 2–3, 46). In his autobiography, Gandhi recalls the difficulties he had in studying Sanskrit in high school, but nevertheless insists, 'every Hindu boy and girl should possess sound Sanskrit learning' (*The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston, 1957), pp. 17–18).

[20] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 72. That Nehru's enthusiasm for Sanskrit was shot through with skepticism about its capacity to function as national language is apparent from the following statement in his reflections on the history of India:

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Nehru, it was reported, had also said that he would 'personally like as many Indians as possible to know Sanskrit which is the very basis of our culture . . .'[21]

Given that so many distinguished nationalists had expressed their faith in Sanskrit, it was disappointing to the Sanskrit Commission that in 1949, the Constituent Assembly had considered, and rejected, proposals which would have instituted Sanskrit, rather than Hindi, as the official language of India. In 1956, the Official Language Commission rejected a renewed plea on behalf of Sanskrit. Even if it was the pre-eminent language of Indian national culture, it was noted by that Commission that Sanskrit was spoken by so few and any suggestion to make it the national medium of communication was mere 'escapism'. 'This escapism does not commend itself to us'.[22] Undeterred, a year later, the Sanskrit Commission offered Sanskrit, again, to the nation, this time as an 'additional official language':

> While for all administrative and ordinary day-to-day purposes, some pan-Indian form of Hindi may be used, it appears inevitable that, in course of time, the prospective All-India Language—*Bharati Bhasa*—at least in its written norm, which would be acceptable to all regions of India, especially in the higher reaches of education and literary activity, will be a form of simple and modernised Sanskrit.[23]

The Commission's belief in the 'inevitability' of Sanskrit was premised on a specific reading of India's history. It insisted that in the distant past, when Sanskrit had been on the lips of every Indian, the

'Speaking at the Oriental Conference held in 1937 at Trivandrum, over which he presided, Dr. F. F. Thomas pointed out what a great unifying force Sanskrit had been in India and how widespread its use still was. He actually suggested that a simple form of Sanskrit, a kind of basic Sanskrit, should be encouraged as a common all-India language today!' (*The Discovery of India* (Delhi, 1993), p. 167).

[21] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 99; see also Nehru, *Discovery of India*, pp. 164–170. R. N. Dandekar, a member of the Sanskrit Commission, elsewhere recalls that in 1961 Nehru declared in a speech at the University of Poona (where he was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, and the citation was read out in Sanskrit) that 'One of my regrets in my life has been that I have had no occasion to learn Sanskrit . . . I must confess that I was greatly moved and thrilled by the mellifluous rhythm of the Sanskrit language. Even the mere sound of that language gently touched and stirred the inner cord of my heart. I believe that history itself has established a kind of innate affinity between Sanskrit and the Indian soul' (quoted by Saroj Bhate, 'Position of Sanskrit in Public Education and Scientific Research in Modern India', in Houben (ed.), *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, p. 400).

[22] *Report of the Official Language Commission*, p. 39.

[23] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 202.

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'nation' had been triumphant. If the nation had to rise from its ashes again, it had to be reintegrated with its Sanskritic soul and spirit from which it had been sundered under centuries of 'alien rule' by Persian, English, and the like, when 'the rolling current of Sanskrit had gradually thinned into a trickle or become cut up into stagnant pools'.[24] To enable the nation's regeneration, Sanskrit had to once again become part of the everyday life of the citizen.

With such an agenda, the Sanskrit Commission went on to make a series of recommendations to the Government of India. If these recommendations were implemented, nothing less than a full-scale Sanskritization of the nation and its citizenry would ensue. From the Commission's point of view, operating as it did on the unshaken premise that there was no India outside and beyond the realm of Sanskrit, it was only restoring to the language what had been its to start with. However, not the least of the consequences of this project would be the dramatic, even revolutionary, transformation that Sanskrit itself would undergo. For, notwithstanding the claims made on its behalf by its modern advocates, Sanskrit had never played the kind of role in the nation's past that was now being envisaged for its present and future. For much of its long, complicated, and checkered career in the subcontinent, it had essentially functioned as a prestige language of high ritual, scholasticism, and elite culture. It was, as Sheldon Pollock has described it, a 'mandarin' language, a paradigmatic example of what he characterizes as a 'theodicy of privilege'. Through its nationalization, however, it stood to lose this aura of privilege and exclusivity that had been such a key to its power and mystique in pre-nationalist times. Formerly limited in provenance if not normatively, at least in everyday practice, to twice-born upper caste men (and to a lesser extent, women) of specific social and ritual backgrounds, it was now enjoined that Sanskrit should be on the lips of every Indian, regardless of caste, class, religion, gender, occupation or age. The vast underclasses of India were now invited to conduct all their activities through a language that had been largely denied to them in the past. Finally, this 'language of perfection' which had prided itself for so long in being *samskrta* ('refined'), was now to be dragged down into the mire of the everyday mundane world of *prakrta* ('natural') from which it had taken such pains to insulate itself over time. Where formerly much of its power stemmed

[24] *Ibid*., pp. 143–4.

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from its restricted and contingent use in specific ritual, literary, and political tasks, it was now proposed that Sanskrit ought to be an essential part of the everyday life of the citizen.[25] Not surprisingly, the Sanskrit Commission confessed in its report that resistance to its proposed plans had been voiced not just by modernists who were skeptical about the ability of the language to express scientific and technological knowledge, but also by conservatives. These latter would rather that Sanskrit continue to play its traditional role in the national life of India, and remain on its 'high pedestal' and 'altar of honour'. Nevertheless, as far as the Commission and others who supported Sanskrit's cause were concerned, it was too vital a 'living force' to be confined to 'its own ivory tower of isolation'.[26]

To a certain extent, the nationalization of Sanskrit proposed by the Commission was already anticipated by the Orientalization of education under colonial rule. Anglicist and Vernacularist protests notwithstanding, through the nineteenth century, Sanskrit became increasingly available to all those who were interested in studying it, as it was introduced into the curricula of numerous high schools, colleges and universities, sometimes even as a compulsory requirement. For a majority of students taking the entrance examinations to Bombay and Calcutta Universities, for instance, Sanskrit (in its guise as a 'classical language') was a mandatory second language, and in other institutions, it was allowed to be studied in lieu of the mother tongue. '. . . these Universities threw the portals of Sanskrit learning wide open to all pupils. In a sense, these Universities were primarily responsible for popularising the study of Sanskrit', the Commission noted, in defending its own agenda.[27] Through the numerous 'national education' schemes proposed by the turn of this century, the 'portals of Sanskrit learning' continued to be widened to all those outside the circle of a privileged few. Indeed, the recurring concern for ensuring that the language was available to all those who sought it may be inferred from the various Sanskrit 'reorganiza-

[25] Pollock, 'The Language of the Gods', and 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis'; see also Madhav Deshpande, *Sociolinguistic Attitudes in India: An Historical Reconstruction* (Ann Arbor, 1979); George Cardona, 'On Attitudes towards Language in Ancient India', *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 1990, 15: 1–19.

[26] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 219.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 20. There are no detailed studies of the spread of Sanskrit education in the various provinces of colonial India, but for the Madras Presidency, see Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance*, pp. 70–110.

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tion' committees set up by numerous provincial governments as well as princely states in the 1930s and 1940s.[28] From this perspective, the Commission's recommendations in 1956 only continued a trend of democratization and demoticization of Sanskrit that had gained momentum over the past century or so.

All the same, by insisting, in the name of national 'regeneration', that Sanskrit ought to be foundational to every Indian citizen's linguistic repertoire, the Commission sought inextricably to link membership in the nation with the mandatory learning of the language:

> It is said that one of the fundamental aims of education should be 'to give a knowledge of the best and the noblest things that were said or done in the past'. If that be so, no system of education in India can afford to deny Sanskrit its rightful place without being untrue to itself. As a matter of fact, so far as Indian education is concerned, Sanskrit may not be counted merely as one of the numerous subjects of study; it must rather be regarded as constituting the foundation . . .[29]

The real burden of the Commission lay in making a case against all those who denied precisely this formulation, that Sanskrit was the foundation of the nation, and hence had to be made a mandatory subject of study in schools. It reluctantly exempted from the principle of compulsion those categories of citizens who were 'not within the atmosphere of Sanskrit'.[30] Yet, there is little doubt that its advocates hoped that the Commission's report would convince all those Urdu-speaking Muslims, Tamil-speaking Dravidians, and English-speaking Anglo-Indians who had declared themselves to be 'outside the atmosphere of Sanskrit' that the language belonged to them as well. For, after all, were they not Indian? To be Indian, in the view of the Commission, was to not deny Sanskrit's foundational value for the nation.

That the Sanskrit Commission would make this assertion is perhaps to be expected, given that a majority of its members were Sanskritists by profession, and Brahman by birth. Yet, this is not the only arena in which the call for Sanskrit as national language surfaced. A decade earlier, we can hear it in another context, at the meetings of the Constituent Assembly of India (1946–49), by men who were not necessarily Sanskritists or Brahman. And it is in this Assembly

[28] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 285–6. See also Bhate, 'Position of Sanskrit in Public Education', pp. 383–91.

[29] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 95. For the Commission's reasons why Sanskrit should be made compulsory in schools, see pp. 93–107.

[30] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 98–9.

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that Sanskrit's place in the future of the nation was first consolidated.

## Constituting Sanskrit

In September 1949, at the height of the Constituent Assembly's fraught debate over the future official language of India, one of its members from Assam, Kuladhar Chaliha, a former tea planter and lawyer, declared: 'We will become better Indians by adopting Sanskrit [as the national language], because Sanskrit and India are co-extensive'.[31] He was not alone in thus expressing his faith in the language. Twenty-seven other members made a similar proposal, among them B. R. Ambedkar, T. T. Krishnamachari, G. Durgabai [Deshmukh], Pandit Lakshmikanta Maitra and Naziruddin Ahmad.[32] A large number of those who supported the cause of Sanskrit were from Madras and West Bengal, for it was a useful weapon with which to counter the growing threat of 'Hindi imperialism'. At least one of its backers, Naziruddin Ahmad, was a member of the Muslim League from Bengal, and another, Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee, was the leading spokesman for Dalit interests in the Assembly. Even for these maverick advocates, the raising of the standard of Sanskrit appears clearly to have been a last-ditch effort to salvage the linguistic mess in which the Constituent Assembly found itself after almost three years of deliberation over the future of India's languages. From the very beginning, chaos attended the Assembly's deliberations over the language provisions of the Constitution. As Granville Austin notes, almost every linguistic issue facing the Assembly—the language to be used in the conduct of its proceedings, the language in which the Constitution was to be framed, the script(s) for the official language(s) of the nation, the system of numerals to be adopted, and so on—was heavily contested, and bode ill for any reasonable consensus emerging in the short run. The Assembly's proceedings periodically broke down over several members' insistence that they would only speak in their 'mother tongue', much to the dismay of the majority who had no way of understanding what was being said. Members, especially from the South, frequently

[31] *Constituent Assembly Debates: Official Report, Vol. 9* (New Delhi, 1949), p. 1402.

[32] Granville Austin, 'Language and the Constitution—The Half-hearted Compromise', in *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford, 1966), p. 301.

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complained of non-comprehension when chaste Hindi speakers took the floor. And every now and then, we read about members engaging each other in heated debate even while pleading mutual incomprehension.[33]

Problems of communication and comprehension only exacerbated fundamental disagreements on the most important linguistic issue facing the Assembly, namely, the language to be named as the future official language of India. An early favorite, Hindustani, especially popular because it had Gandhi's backing, became one of the numerous victims of the Partition of India, an event that transpired even as the Assembly was in session. After August 1947, even those who had supported Hindustani hesitated to use that name, preferring the term 'broad Hindi'.[34] By early 1948, the Assembly was increasingly divided between all those who favored a highly-Sanskritized Hindi, and those who did not. And amongst the latter, we hear some really passionate speeches on the value and worth of English which may well have been the language of colonialism, but was also, these members insisted, the language in which the Indian nation had been first wrought.[35] We also hear occasional voices from the fringes which declared that if antiquity, sophistication, and depth of literature were the criteria for choice of the official language, perhaps Bengali, Marathi or Tamil, rather than the 'upstart' and 'rudimentary' Hindi, had a greater claim.[36]

In this Babeldom, it is perhaps not surprising that the cause of Sanskrit—unusual though it may appear at first sight—found a space. There were three, somewhat contrary, grounds on which its supporters built their case pragmatically, ideologically, and sentimentally. Pragmatically, as Naziruddin Ahmad shrewdly realized, the advantage Sanskrit had as the putative official language was that it would be equally disadvantageous for all citizens. 'I offer you a language which is the grandest and the greatest, and it is impartially

[33] Granville Austin, 'Language and the Constitution', pp. 265–307. See also P. Kodanda Rao, *Language Issue in the Indian Constituent Assembly, 1946–50: Rational Support for English and Non-Rational Support for Hindi* (Bombay, 1969). Similar problems continued to plague the Indian Parliament's activities in the next decade as well. On this, see Mahadev L. Apte, 'Language Controversies in the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha): 1952–1960', in W. O'Barr and Jean O'Barr (eds), *Language and Politics* (Mouton, 1976), pp. 213–34.

[34] Austin, 'Language and the Constitution', pp. 277–8.

[35] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, pp. 1331, 1358–9.

[36] *Ibid*., pp. 1333, 1375–6; see also Ludo Rocher, *Le Probleme Linguistique en Inde* (Brusells, 1967), pp. 9–35.

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difficult, equally difficult for all to learn'.[37] Since it was nobody's spoken language or 'mother tongue', no single community would have an unfair start in the race for jobs and privileges, as would be the case with Hindi.[38] At the same time, since so many of India's languages were already so infused with Sanskritic words, it was suggested that it would be easy for their speakers readily to learn Sanskrit. Further, in contrast to Hindi which was a mere 'provincial' language that could not be readily transformed into a 'national' language without a good deal of effort, it was argued that Sanskrit was already an all-India language. 'Wherever I have travelled, if I have not been able to make myself understood in any other language, I have been able to make myself understood in Sanskrit', one member recalled. Another pointed out that '[o]ur whole life is so interwoven with Sanskrit that you cannot get away from [it] . . .'. In that case, why not make it the official langauge for everyone, he asked?[39]

Sanskrit's advocates were also quick to seize upon the comparable example of Israel and its recent efforts to revive Hebrew and install it as the official language of the Jewish state. In doing so, the Assembly was told, Jews were sending a signal to the world about the respect they had for their language, culture, civilization, and heritage. We Indians ought to do the same, for are not all our ancient glories contained in Sanskrit? 'Let the world know that we also know to respect the rich heritage of our spiritual culture.'[40] Like Bankimchandra and Vivekananda before him (and Max Mueller and others before them), Pandit Lakshmikanta Maitra, the chief spokesman for the Sanskrit cause in the Assembly and a Brahman member from West Bengal, insisted:

> We should give our message to the West. The West is steeped in materialistic civilisation. The Message of the Gita, the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Tantras, the Charaka and Susrutha etc., will have to be disseminated to the West. It is thus and thus alone that we may be able to command the respect of the world; not by our political debates, nor by our scientific

[37] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, p. 1334.

[38] So, B. Das, a non-Brahman member from Orissa, observed, 'This morning when Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra was speaking, I was almost persuaded to accept Sanskrit as the official language of the State, so that everybody will start with an even keel in that mother of all languages. There will then be no rivalry between the sons and daughters of the leaders of U[nited] P[rovinces] and C[entral] P[rovinces] that are present here and the sons and daughters of leaders of Orissa or Madras. They will all learn Sanskrit.' *Constituent Assembly Debates*, p. 1396.

[39] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, pp. 1354, 1402.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 1360.

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discoveries which, compared with their achievements, are nothing. The West looks to you to give them guidance in this war-torn world where morals are shattered and religious and spiritual life have gone to shambles . . .[41]

Here, Maitra echoes what Partha Chatterjee has identified as the 'problematic' and 'thematic' of nationalist thought in India which asserted the autonomy of the nation from colonial domination even while continuing to use the knowledge procedures and modes of reasoning of post-Enlightenment thought based on timeless Manichean distinctions between 'West' and 'East'.[42] Especially in its 'moment of departure', nationalist discourse conceded that the West was indeed superior, but only in the realms of material culture and science; in the domain of spirituality, however, it was India that held the winning hand, and would indeed teach the West. So, true modernity for India 'would lie in combining the superior material culture of Western cultures with the spiritual greatness of the East'.[43] For its advocates in the Constituent Assembly, Sanskrit would guarantee such a modernity in which the nation's uniqueness would not be sacrificed in the rush towards material progress. Indeed, for Maitra, Sanskrit was to be the panacea for not just the nation's problems, but the world's as well. On the national front, 'I honestly believe that if we accept Sanskrit, all [our] troubles, all [our] jealousies, all [our] bitterness will vanish with all the psychological complex that has been created'. The Indian nation, thus spiritually rehabilitated through Sanskrit, would then be ready to guide the 'materialistic' West out of its moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Maitra's reasoning here is clearly couched in the vocabulary of patriarchal Orientalism. Indians ought to embrace Sanskrit because it was the language 'of their forefathers' and of 'their great rishis [sages]'. It was also the language 'in which our culture is enshrined'. In his reading of the past, all of India's worth is reduced to its great spiritual truths, and these spiritual truths in turn are identified with Sanskrit. In the words of Kuladhar Chaliha, a fellow advocate, 'all that is good and all that is valuable and all that we fight for and we hold precious have come from Sanskrit literature'. So much so that if Indians did not embrace Sanskrit, Maitra continued, he could not fathom what other contribution they could make to the world. So, 'in the name

[41] *Ibid*., p. 1359.
[42] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986), pp. 38–9.
[43] *Ibid*., p. 51.

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of the great rishis' who gave Sanskrit to us, and 'in the name of that great culture and civilisation of which we are all proud', he called upon his fellow Indians 'to bury [their] hatchets' and 'cheerfully accept Sanskrit as the National and official language of free India'.[44]

The case for Sanskrit was built on sentimental grounds as well, and here, its advocates pulled out all the stops. They quoted profusely from the colonial and European archive—from William Jones and Franz Bopp and Max Mueller—and waxed eloquently about its mellifluousness, its sweetness, and its grandeur. Sanskrit is the 'mother' of all the languages of the world, even their 'revered grand mother'. 'When I am pleading for Sanskrit, let there be no derisive merriment anywhere in the House', warned Maitra. 'Let me ask every honorable Member of this House, irrespective of the province he comes from, "Does he disown his grandmother?"' To those who argued that Sanskrit was a 'dead' language, Maitra retorted: 'If Sanskrit is dead, may I say that Sanskrit is ruling us from her grave?'[45] Indeed, even those not in favor of Sanskrit agreed that it was the language *par excellence*, that its alphabet was 'the most perfect and scientific in the World'; that it was impossible to turn their backs on it for 'it is in our blood; it is the fountainhead of our mother tongues and the storehouse of our culture'. So, Purushottam Das Tandon, one of the more passionate advocates for Hindi as the official language declared, 'I bow to those who love Sanskrit. I am one of them. I love Sanskrit. I think every Indian born in this country should learn Sanskrit. Sanskrit preserves our ancient heritage for us . . .'[46]

Even in their wildest dreams, the most enthusiastic of Sanskrit's supporters could not have believed that their project had any chance of succeeding, taking on, as they had to, the powerful Hindi lobby in the Assembly, as well as numerous modernists and populists who accused the language of being 'difficult', 'archaic', inaccessible to the populace, and so on. However, even if they did not manage to institute Sanskrit as the official language, there were other ways in which they succeeded in bringing it through the back door into the nation's Constitution, and into its future.

First, and most crucially, the Constitution, even while identifying Hindi as the official language of India, clearly names Sanskrit as the

[44] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, pp. 1359–60, 1402.
[45] *Ibid*., pp. 1354–5.
[46] *Ibid*., 1408, 1450.

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primary source from which it should draw upon to enrich itself and develop its vocabulary.[47] Such a linking of Sanskrit to the official language is perhaps not surprising, for at least since the late eighteenth century, it had been identified by numerous colonial administrators and missionaries as the 'fountainhead' and 'reservoir' of not just Hindi, but all the languages of 'Hindu' India.[48] Further, from the 1880s on, the supporters of Hindi had launched a sustained program of Sanskritizing Hindi, in their attempts to distance the language from its Persian–Urdu (read: 'Muslim') past.[49] By October 1948, the Hindi lobby in the Assembly had abandoned any pretence of working with a composite Hindustani, and singled out Sanskrit as the only language to which Hindi should turn for its improvement. In its view, 'the linguistic unity of India' as well as the 'highest dictates of nationalism' demanded that Sanskrit be made the sole source of new vocabulary for the new official language.[50] Indeed, Hindi enthusiasts shrewdly made a case for their language by insisting that Hindi had all the advantages of associating with Sanskrit, without the disadvantages of being Sanskrit. So, Hindi, it was declared, 'had descended from Vedic Sanskrit [which] contains our ancient culture . . .'; it had the privilege of being 'the eldest and seniormost daughter' of the 'mother' of all Indian languages; and in its Sanskritized form, it could be readily understood in the North as well as the South. In contrast to Sanskrit, however, it was spoken by a large majority of Indians, was easy to learn, comprehend, and write.[51] So, it was the language most appropriate for a democratic and modern, yet ancient and classical, nation.

Sanskrit also triumphed in the battle over scripts that was fought out on the floor of the Assembly. In the early days of the Assembly, there was some discussion of retaining both the 'Persian' and 'Devanagari' scripts for the official language. But by the time the Draft Constitution and its revised final version were produced in 1949, it

[47] *Ibid*., p. 1489. See also Article 351 of the Constitution of India.
[48] Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*.
[49] Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts*; Krishna Kumar, 'Quest for Self-Identity: Cultural Consciousness and Education in the Hindi Region, 1880–1950', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1990, 25(25), pp. 1247–55; David Lelyveld, 'The Fate of Hindustani: Colonial Knowledge and the Project of a National Language', in Breckenridge and van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*, pp. 189–214.
[50] Austin, 'Language and the Constitution', p. 283.
[51] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, pp. 1379, 1408. See also Raghu Vira, *India's National Language* (New Delhi, 1965).

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was Devanagari that was clearly named as the sole script in which Hindi would be written and developed.[52] The triumph of (Deva)Nagari in this fashion had already been anticipated by the outcome of the various 'script wars' that had been fought in many parts of northern India since at least the last decades of the nineteenth century, between Urdu/Arabic/Persian 'characters', and Nagari or Hindi 'characters'.[53] The horrors of Partition only confirmed the reigning sentiment that the Arabic script, like its users, was 'alien' and 'foreign' to India. But above all, the selection of 'Devanagari' as the official script was ensured because it had been, in the view of many of its supporters, Sanskrit's script for centuries. As Alagu Rai Shastri unequivocally insisted: 'Our national language shall be Hindi and our script shall be Devanagari which we have got from the "Rigveda" and whose words have been borrowed from that great ocean of learning . . .'[54]

[52] Austin, 'Language and the Constitution', p. 296. Article 343 (1) of the Constitution of India states clearly, 'The official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script'. There is more than a touch of (Orientalist) irony in the Constitution's naming of the script so unequivocally as 'Devanagari', for it is a term that appears to have gained in currency, over the more popular (and more ancient) 'Nagari', only in the colonial period, its earliest attestation possibly being 1776 (Walter Maurer, 'On the Name Devanāgarī', *Journal of American Orientalist Society*, 1976, 96(1), p. 103). Note especially Maurer's observation, 'Though "Devanāgarī" is but an extension of the much older name "Nāgarī" and is therefore synonymous with it, the two are not interchangeable. Thus what is Devanāgarī may be called Nāgarī, but not all that is Nāgarī may be termed "Devanāgarī" ' (p. 104). Yet, it is the latter that has come to prevail. For a nationalist reading of the antiquity and widespread use of Devanagari, see V. S. Agarwala, 'The Devanāgarī Script', in *Indian Systems of Writing* (Delhi, 1966), pp. 12–16. Here, it may also be noted that supporters of Devanagari lost, by a narrow margin, the battle over numerals. The Constitution retains the use of international numerals, although the President does have the right to authorize the official use of Devanagari numerals as well, as per Article 343(2) (Austin, 'Language and the Constitution', pp. 294–5).

[53] King, *One Language, Two Scripts*. King has noted that supporters of Devanagari had to also contend with eliminating the popularity of numerous other versions of Nagari, especially Kaithi, a cursive variant of the script that had wide currency in many parts of eastern India, but which was deemed to be tainted because of its links with Hindustani or Urdu (*ibid*., pp. 65–9).

[54] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, pp. 1388–9; see also p. 1385. For the historical roots of such an identification, see King, *One Language, Two Scripts*. And yet, as the Sanskrit Commission noted a few years later, Devanagari had never been the only script of Sanskrit (which was typically written in a wide number of local scripts), and its identification as the authentic and sole script of Sanskrit came to be made by Europeans in the colonial period. The Commission offered a number of very good reasons for this identification: the use of Devanagari by scholars in Banaras, a city that was seen as the authentic home of Sanskrit by Europeans; the educational practices of the three principal Universities whose Sanskrit books and examinations

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Finally, although Sanskrit was named in the Draft Constitution as the primary language from which Hindi would draw to develop, surprisingly, it was *not*, at first, included in Schedule VIIA. This schedule identified the thirteen other languages from which Hindi could borrow for its improvement, so that 'it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India'.[55] Its advocates in the Assembly protested this oversight, and ensured that in the final version of the Constitution, Sanskrit was included in the Eight Schedule.[56] Since this Schedule names the principal spoken languages of India that matter politically, economically, and demographically, by making it to this list, Sanskrit was assured, at the very least, a status similar to theirs. Of course, ironically, Sanskrit was now compelled to be on par with languages over which, in its own past, it had claimed superiority and lordship. Nevertheless its presence in the Eight Schedule, even as it thus democratized and demoticized the language, rescued Sanskrit from the vaults of India's past and ensured a role for it in the nation's future.

## Nationalizing Sanskrit

Not least of the consequences of the empowerment of Sanskrit thus by the Constitution is that a space was opened up for the creation of government agencies such as the Sanskrit Commission and the Central Sanskrit Board, formed to ensure that the language would have a continuing significance in the lives and livelihood of modern Indians. In turn, the agendas of these agencies with regard to the

were published in Devanagari; and above all, the printing of most Sanskrit works in the nineteenth century, in Europe as well as India, in Devanagari, especially Max Mueller's edition of the *Rig Veda*. Beautifully anticipating Benedict Anderson's thesis on print-capitalism, the Commission noted: 'Printing and the world-wide use of the printed book may, indeed, be said to have brought in the standardization of script for Sanskrit works during the first half of the last century, and to have thereby bestowed upon Devanagari the status of the accepted all-India script for Sanskrit, and, to a large extent, even the national script of India'. The Commission recommended to the Government that 'while the knowledge of the Devanagari script should be made universal as the pan-Indian script, the employment of the local scripts as a potent aid in the dissemination of Sanskrit should be continued'. It was the Commission's opinion that Sanskrit written in the same script as the mother tongue, rather than in Devanagari, could be learnt more easily, and would touch the heart of the speaker more quickly (*Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 194–7).

[55] Article 351 of the Constitution of India.

[56] *Constituent Assembly Debates*, pp. 1323, 1489.

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place of Sanskrit in the nation's future derived from their imagination of its role in India's past. Here, there is little doubt that its advocates faced an uphill task in establishing their claim that Sanskrit had always been the one and truly 'national' language of India from time immemorial. For, in the colonial archive, if the language had picked up several new (and influential) admirers, it had also received its share of brickbats. For every Jones who declared Sanskrit to be 'more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either . . .', there was a Macaulay or a Gilchrist who had characterized it as 'priestly', 'dead', 'mysterious', 'arcane', the select privilege of an exclusive few. By the middle decades of this century, many of these colonial charges found a renewed life in powerful arguments against the language launched from various quarters. So, the Dravidian movement identified Sanskrit as the weapon with which the Aryan Brahmanical North had conquered the Dravidian non-Brahman South; regionalists and populists declared that the 'mother tongues' had been marginalized by an enchantment with its classicism; modernists insisted that its baroqueness was an impediment to progress and scientization; and secularists were wary of its association with Hindu revivalism. So, the Commission had to perforce rescue Sanskrit from the stigma of exclusivity, privilege, and arcaneness with which it had come to be burdened, and demonstrate that it was truly a language of and for all Indians, regardless of caste, class, religious, ethnic, regional, or linguistic affiliation. In other words, the language had to be discursively nationalized before it could be officially inserted into the mundane everyday world of the nation.

Not unexpectedly, the Commission went about making its case through a selective (re)interpretation of India's textual, linguistic, and cultural history which had been put at its disposal by colonial and nationalist historiography. But the real innovation, of which it was justly proud, was that it supplemented its textual and historical survey with a detailed analysis of a questionnaire consisting of over ninety questions which was distributed to hundreds of individuals and institutions all over the country. The questionnaire (note its very first query: 'what special role has the Sanskritist to play in the national life of India today?') was in Sanskrit and English, and the Commission was pleased to report that some 40% of the replies were returned in Sanskrit.[57] In addition, members of the Commission

[57] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. ii.

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toured the country between January and May 1957, and interviewed '1,100 persons representing various shades of opinion', including leading Sanskrit scholars and pandits, political leaders, bureaucrats, educationalists, and even scientists. Highlights of the tour included visits to famous temples, listening to Vedic recitations, and watching an 'entertainment programme in Sanskrit' in Madras. The questionnaire with the list of questions in English and Sanskrit (but not the answers), the 'log book' of the tour undertaken by its members, the list of individuals and institutions who sent replies, the list of institutions visited, the list of all those who gave oral testimony, all these were carefully appended to the published Report for everyone to read.[58] In other words, the Commission was anxious to establish that its findings had been arrived at not in a willy-nilly fashion, but by deploying the technologies of knowledge and methodologies of science available to the modern state. What better way to demonstrate the value and worth of Sanskrit to contemporary India than by showing that modern and scientific modes of survey and analysis substantiated such claims? Although a detailed socio-economic, professional, and ideological profile of the men and women interviewed may well reveal otherwise, the Commission was particularly keen to stress the 'all-India' quality of its endeavours. No stone had been left unturned, no person worth asking had been left un-asked. And the result? In his letter to the Minister of Education, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee wrote confidently: 'About the enthusiasm of the people of India as a whole for Sanskrit, we have received, in the course of our tour and our work, the most convincing evidence.'[59]

How convincing is the evidence presented about the nation-wide popularity of the language? Given that it was set up in a decade marked by linguistic, regional and ethnic tensions all over the nation, the Commission was quick to characterize as 'untenable' the 'unfortunate propaganda' that Sanskrit was the language of a particular community:

> That Sanskrit does not belong to any particular community is proved by Andhra and Kerala where the entire non-Brahman classes are imbued with Sanskrit ... In Kerala, even Izhavas, Thiyas, Moplas and Christians read Sanskrit. In Madhya Pradesh, we are told, a paper in Sanskrit was compulsory at the School Final Examination and even Muslims took it. In a Lucknow Intermediate College, there are Muslim girls studying Sanskrit; in Gujarat, Parsis study it; in Punjab, there are several Sikhs among Sanskrit

[58] *Ibid*., pp. 285–439.
[59] *Ibid*., p. ii.

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students and teachers, and Sastris and research scholars in Sanskrit. The Director of Public Instruction of Madhya Pradesh, who is a Christian, told us that he advised the Anglo-Indian students also to read Sanskrit. It was necessary that, as future citizens of India, they gained an insight into the mind and the culture of the bulk of the Indian people. And this, he added, was possible only through the study of Sanskrit.[60]

This statement is typical of the sampler approach adopted by the Commission to prove the universality of Sanskrit among all of India's religious communities, be they Christians in Kerala, Muslims in Lucknow, Parsis in Gujarat, or Sikhs in Punjab. Elsewhere, Buddhists and Jains are added to this list.[61] Indeed, the one community left unnamed are Hindus, for the Commission labored hard, at one level, to distance the language from the religion with which it had become exclusively identified over at least the past two centuries of Orientalist scholarship. 'It is definitely wrong to assume that Sanskrit represents only the religious literature of the Hindus', it was stated unequivocally.[62] Since Hinduism could not be officially privileged in the emergent national culture, and since Sanskrit had to function as the common medium of that national culture, it followed that the reputation of Sanskrit as the hegemonic scriptural language of Hinduism had to be disavowed.[63]

And yet, as in so much else in modern, 'secular' India, the undertow of unmarked Hinduism is visible in every other page of the Commission's report, even as (Hindu) 'religion' is resignified as 'morality' or 'culture'. Texts and authors most frequently quoted to document Sanskrit's significance for modern Indians—the *Upanishads*, Valmiki, the *Gita*, Kalidasa—are invariably those that an Indian readership has learnt to associate with a Hindu sensibility. Statements like, 'educated Indians, whatever their chief

[60] *Ibid*., pp. 65–6.
[61] *Ibid*., p. 79.
[62] *Ibid*.
[63] Correspondingly, the Commission was careful not to overtly blame Muslim rule for the decline of Sanskrit. Indeed, there is only one instance in its entire report in which Muslims, or some of their leaders at any rate, are represented as anti-Sanskrit: 'It is because some leaders among the Muslims of India, not attuned to the spirit of Sanskrit, or deliberately ignoring it, tried (partly through the inspiration of British imperialism) to channel the masses of Indian citizens professing Islam along a different line, seeking to throw off the inheritance of Sanskrit, that India had to suffer the pangs of a living amputation, bringing untold misery on millions of people . . .' (*Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 81–2). These lines are particularly remarkable for the suggestion that the Partition of India was a consequence of the neglect of Sanskrit.

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vocation in life, are invariably drawn to the study of the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* and of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* . . .', betray the working assumption of the Commission that the 'Indian' is by definition 'Hindu'.[64] Indeed, it is telling that the only religious institutions that members of the Commission visited on their all-India tour were Hindu temples and centers of Vedic and Vedantic learning. Their visits to these places convinced them that the Government ought to regulate these institutions so that their funds may be properly directed toward the encouragement of Sanskrit studies. Even though the Commission conceded that a 'secular' state could not promote religious education, this did not mean that Vedic studies should not receive government support, for 'the *Vedas* form the bedrock of Sanskrit literature and Indian culture'.[65] It is worth noting that neither 'religion' nor 'Hinduism' are mentioned in this characterization of the *Vedas*. Because the *Vedas* are deemed to be the 'bedrock' of 'Indian culture', the Government had to take steps 'to preserve the oral tradition of Vedic recitals; young students should be encouraged to learn Vedic hymns by rote with correct intonation and accents according to the different schools; . . . and special attention should be paid to the resuscitation and propagation of the traditions of the *Samaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*'. It was also recommended that the Government's Five-Year Plans should make provisions for the support of 'gifted exponents of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*', for 'epic and Puranic expositions could be effectively utilised for the purpose of cultural propaganda and the moral toning up of the masses'. All-India Radio should be encouraged to supplement its weekly Sanskrit broadcasts with daily recitations of moral sayings from the *Gita* and other classics, as well as celebrate special events such as Kalidasa Day. The government-run Films Division ought to produce documentary films based on the Sanskrit epics, clearly anticipating in this regard by at least three decades the broadcast of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* on national television.[66] So, the Commission's disavowal of the exclusive association of Sanskrit with Hinduism notwithstanding, its own proposals for Sanskritizing the nation only confirmed the Hindu-ness of Sanskrit, and of the

[64] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 102.
[65] *Ibid*., p. 209.
[66] *Ibid*., pp. 211–13; 225–6.

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nation. The other religious communities of India, let alone their texts (even those reportedly in Sanskrit), receive no attention whatsoever in this scheme of things.

Its advocates were also at pains to prove the truly national character of Sanskrit by denying its exclusive association with Brahmanical privilege and priestly orthodoxy. 'It has wrongly been averred that the study of Sanskrit is only sacerdotal . . .'[67] To document their case in this regard, they turned to Tamilnadu where over the past few decades, the Dravidian movement had tried to convince ('non-Brahman') Tamilians of Sanskrit's predatory role in their past, and of its irrelevance for their present and future.[68] But even here, the Commission was able to interview 'several non-Brahmans in high position [*sic*] and active in public life, business etc, and . . . found them all favorable to Sanskrit . . . In Chidambaram, we were able to find a group of non-Brahman merchants of the town who appeared before us for interview as staunch supporters of Sanskrit education and culture'. Here, once again, as in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and other places, the Commission noted with satisfaction that in a Chidambaram high school, a Muslim student topped the Sanskrit class; that in Tanjavur, Christians, too, studied Sanskrit; and that in Madras, there were 'Harijans' who learnt the language.[69] 'As we moved among the people, in the temples and the streets, in public and private meetings, we found that, in Tamilnad[u], the antipathy towards Sanskrit was confined to a section trying to make political

[67] *Ibid*., p. 79.

[68] Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance*, pp. 70–110; Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Berkeley, 1997).

[69] For a revealing first-person impression of what it means for lower castes and 'Harijans' to study Sanskrit in independent India, the Sanskrit Commission's proud claims notwithstanding, see Kumud Pawde's poignant 'The Story of My Sanskrit', in *A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Bombay, 1992), pp. 24–34. Pawde writes movingly about the many trials she faced in her attempts to learn Sanskrit, overcoming which she became the first woman of a scheduled caste to secure a distinction in her Master's examinations in the language. Her caste status, however, prevented her from getting a job as a Sanskrit teacher for a long time in a nation that still linked Sanskritic learning with Brahmans and upper castes, although that same nation did not fail to appropriate her as an icon of its own progressive modernity. So she tells us she was introduced thus at a public meeting of Sanskrit scholars: 'Whereas our traditional books have forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and Shudras, a woman from those very Shudras, from the lowest caste among them, will today, in Sanskrit, introduce these scholars. This is the beginning of a progressive way of thinking in independent India' (p. 26). I thank Robert Goldman for this reference.

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capital out of it . . .'. The Report noted that so anxious were Tamilians about the fate of Sanskrit that Madras returned the largest number of replies to the Commission's questionnaire.[70]

In turn, the Commission was anxious to demonstrate that Sanskrit was not just a language of the Aryan North, but of the Dravidian South as well, the Dravidian movement's claims to the contrary notwithstanding:

> Our Modern Indian languages, both Aryan and Dravidian, are in the same boat. They have been, all of them, under the aegis of Sanskrit. The Modern Aryan languages were all born in the lap of Sanskrit; and as for the Dravidian languages, ever since their earliest literary usage, they have been nurtured by Sanskrit . . .[71]

The opening page of the Report strategically quotes verses by two 'southerners', the Sanskrit playwright Dandin at the Pallava court, who had declared Sanskrit to be 'the Divine Speech set forth by the Great Sages'; and Senavaraiyar, the medieval commentator to the Tamil grammar, the *Tolkappiyam*, who wrote in Tamil that '. . . Sanskrit is common to all parts of the country'. Elsewhere, it quotes another Tamil savant, Sivagnana Munivar, who had declared 'the nature of Tamil will not be clear to those who have not learnt Sanskrit'. When the great intellects of the South had wanted to express high and serious thoughts, they invariably turned to Sanskrit rather than to their own mother tongues, it was noted.[72] But it was not just with the great intellects of the South that Sanskrit mattered. 'For all common day-to-day activities, numerous Sanskrit words . . . are freely used in South India in all strata of society', V. Raghavan declared in his inaugural speech to the 1948 All-India Oriental Conference. In another context, Chatterjee dismissed the efforts of the 'Pure Tamil' movement, and declared that 'at this late date, it would be impossible to make Tamil expressive of modern thoughts and ideas without borrowing from Sanskrit.'[73]

Indeed, its advocates argued that rather than being the language of Brahmanical exclusivity in the South, Sanskrit had allowed southerners of all classes to communicate with other Indians. Without

[70] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 66. For the Madras government's less-than-enthusiastic reception of the Sanskrit Commission's proposals, see Government of Madras Order No. 1535 (Education), dated August 6, 1958.

[71] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 85.

[72] *Ibid*.

[73] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 16; Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Samskrta Dig-Vijaya* (Calcutta, 1985), pp. 13–14.

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Sanskrit, south Indians would truly be cut off from the rest of India and not be able to participate in the nation. In turn, the South had for long been the 'veritable asylum' for 'Indian' culture and Sanskritic learning. The unspecified reason for this, of course, was the assumption that the North had been de-Sanskritized (and hence de-Indianized) under Muslim rule.[74] So, when north Indians visited the South, it was Sanskrit that allowed them to communicate with their fellow Indians. So, Raghavan wrote confidently that 'if we take all the derived North Indian languages and the South Indian languages together into consideration, we find that the linguistic GCM [Greatest Common Measure] of India is Sanskrit'.[75]

Thus, the appropriateness of Sanskrit as national language lay in that it belonged to no one single region, caste, or religion, even while belonging to all of them. Like the mighty Ganga, the 'national' river of India, Sanskrit, too, was 'ageless, ever-flowing . . . [absorbing] during its long space-time elements of value from all the regional cultures, [growing] into the greater, the larger, and the national tradition that it is'. Similarly, like the great banyan tree, Sanskrit, too, 'has also put forth its own shoots in the form of the earlier Prakrits and the later Apabhramsa which in course of time gave rise to the modern vernaculars'. Indeed, the very land 'from the snow-covered abode of Siva down to the wave-washed feet of Kumari' reverberates with the sounds of Sanskrit. Sanskrit's geography provided the template for the nation's geography, and the blueprint for its territorial unity.

> Sanskrit has always projected a pan-Indian image, an image of India as one country . . . Through its cosmology and the geographical account of the country and its boundaries, the seven great rivers, the seven great cities, the expression '*ā-setuhimācalam*'—'from the Cape to the Himalayas'—and through the building up of a network of holy spots, holy waters and shrines and the institution of pilgrimage . . . Sanskrit consolidated the territorial unity . . . It developed the concept of one country, Bhāratavarṣa, and love and veneration for the same as expressed in the saying, 'Mother and Motherland are greater than heaven'.[76]

So, Sanskrit was by definition the true national language of India, for the nation had always been its domain.

Yet, for all their concern with nationalizing Sanskrit by rooting it firmly within the nation's present territorial boundaries, its advocates also proudly pointed to its many extra-national affiliations, here

[74] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 16; *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 66.
[75] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 16; see also Chatterjee, *Samskrta Dig-Vijaya*, pp. 11–12.
[76] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, pp. 20, 32–41, 50–1.

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echoing the claims of nationalist historiography of the previous decades about the existence of a 'Greater India' incorporating the Hindu 'colonies' of south-east and central Asia:

> The Middle East, Central Asia, China and Japan, and the whole of South-East Asia came under a sort of cultural empire inspired by Sanskrit language, its sciences and epics, its religion and philosophy and arts. Mathematics, Medicine and the Fables in Sanskrit were translated by Arabia to pass them on to Europe and to the modern scientific world. To Tibet, Central Asia, China and Japan, Sanskrit gave Buddhism in its Sanskrit schools. To Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma and Indonesia and Ceylon, Hinduism and Buddhism, alphabet, script, literature, Ramayana and Mahabharata in sculpture and dance, temples and festivals were given by this language and its derivative the Pali. It is out of Pali and Sanskrit that Thailand is today building up its new technical and administrative vocabulary. Thus Sanskrit consolidated not only India but played an integrating role in the whole Orient . . .[77]

This is not the only instance in which we encounter the vocabulary of imperialism in relation to the spread of Sanskrit. A collection of essays by Suniti Kumar Chatterjee was posthumously published under the title, *Samskrita Dig-Vijaya* [The Universal Conquest of Sanskrit], and documented the progressive establishment of the 'empire of Sanskrit' first within India, and then elsewhere. Long before English underwrote Britain's 'civilizing' mission in its colonies, Sanskrit had 'civilized' many parts of the world—given them their literatures, their philosophy, their arts, and their scripts. Unlike the later-day colonial empires, however, Sanskrit's 'empire' was concerned with peace, happiness, and the quest for the Ultimate Reality.[78] It was asserted that 'Sanskrit has been, from the most ancient times, a symbol and means of unity among the peoples of the world'. From Ireland to India, Sanskrit and its 'family' of Indo-European languages had 'embraced the vast stretch of the earth'. Indeed, it was the 'discovery' of this fact by William Jones that gave to Sanskrit 'a new importance and prestige in the world-context', and spurred 'a new awakening of national consciousness' amongst the Indian intelligentsia.[79]

Here, it is quite clear that for its 'nationalist' admirers, the recognition that the West accorded to Sanskrit confirmed their own recog-

[77] *Ibid*., pp. 32–3.
[78] Chatterjee, *Samskrta Dig-Vijaya*, pp. 8–9.
[79] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 143; *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 69.

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nition of its greatness and prestige, and usefulness. Indeed, so enthusastic was the Commission about the admiration in the West for the language that it recommended to the Government that Sanskrit should find a place, not only in the Indian passport, but also in the credentials that Indian ambassadors presented abroad to heads of states. For even if it was not as readily understood abroad as it is in India, it enjoys great prestige among Westerners who in any case think of India as 'Sanskrit India', the Report noted. Some members of the Commission even observed that it had been their experience that when Indians spoke in Sanskrit at international gatherings, their ideas 'had a much more respectful acceptance than would be accorded to a speech in any other Indian language'.[80] So, through Sanskrit, the emergent nation would secure the respect of the West, even while preserving its own authenticity and uniqueness.

However, if the admiration of the West for Sanskrit may ensure India's prestige and primacy in the hierarchy of modern nations, its advocates had to wrestle with the specific way in which that admiration had come packaged. For European scholars had domesticated Sanskrit by analogizing the language to 'classical' Greek and Latin. In the late nineteenth century, the analogy had proved useful to numerous Indian nationalists in asserting a parity between Indians and Europeans, even as they insisted that India was the 'parent' of the modern West. In the 1940s and 1950s, however, the same analogy was a source of embarrassment for supporters of Sanskrit, for these languages, especially Latin, were widely regarded as elite, literary tongues not spoken by the people. Recognizing that its comparability to classical Greek and Latin may be important for establishing linguistic prestige, antiquity and venerability, but was a liability in making a case for its everyday viability for the nation's populace, advocates of Sanskrit now dismissed the analogy as 'absurd'. So, it was argued that unlike Greek and Latin, Sanskrit was 'more than a mere classical language in India':

> Greek and Latin did not and do not have the same sort of deep and all-inclusive influence which Sanskrit still has in Indian life. They are at the best academic, the concern of scholars. But Sanskrit is something more profound and more vital than that. Not only is it academic in the true sense of the term, but it is popular also . . .[81]

[80] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 89.
[81] *Ibid*., p. 88.

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The extent to which Sanskrit had been a popular spoken language in the past has for long been a matter of scholarly debate.[82] Both the Constituent Assembly and the Official Language Commission had rejected the language on precisely these grounds, the latter even noting that 'only 500 odd persons returned themselves with Sanskrit as their mother tongue in the 1951 census'.[83] The Sanskrit Commission, however, operated on the principle that Sanskrit had once been the spoken language of the people of India, and indeed continues to be widely understood today. So Raghavan wrote: 'Thousands in every village, town and city sit to this day and listen to Valmiki and wipe off their tears as the exponent reads "*Rāmo Rāmo Rāma iti prajānām abhavan kathāh*". Is Homer expounded thus in the streets of Europe'?[84]

Its advocates also argued that it was especially scandalous to declare, following the Greek and Latin analogy, that Sanskrit was 'dead', a characterization which had picked up momentum by the middle of the nineteenth century in the course of the acrimonious debates between the Orientalists, Anglicists and Vernacularists over the direction that colonial educational policy ought to take. The Sanskrit Commission instead declared that Sanskrit 'is as much a live language as any mother tongue going about':

> Even at the present day, Sanskrit is very very living [*sic*], because a large number of people use Sanskrit in their conversation, when they come from different parts of the country, and composition in Sanskrit, in both prose and verse, goes on almost unabated. . . . When Sanskrit is now being used even to express modern scientific or political ideas in essays or discourses on various modern subjects, it cannot be said to have closed the door to further development—it has still life in it. All these things would go to establish that Sanskrit is still a living force in Indian life.[85]

Given this conclusion that Sanskrit was still 'a living force in Indian life', the Commission dismissed as absurd those detractors who claimed that 'Sanskrit can only help to make people reactionary

[82] Hans H. Hock, 'Spoken Sanskrit in Uttar Pradesh: Profile of a Dying Prestige Language', in *Dimensions of Sociolinguistics in South Asia*, eds Edward C. Dimock and Braj B. Kachru (New Delhi, 1992), pp. 247–60; A. Wezler, 'Do You Speak Sanskrit: On a Class of Sanskrit Texts composed in the Late Middle Ages', in Houben (ed.), *The Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, pp. 327–46.

[83] *Report of the Official Language Commission*, p. 39. From 1881 onwards, census reports show that several hundreds declared Sanskrit as the language of their home or as their 'parent tongue'. Colonial officials were invariably skeptical of such claims (see, for example, *Census of India, 1891: General Report* (London, 1893), p. 144).

[84] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 14.

[85] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 88–9; see also Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 14.

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in their attitude to life—make them shut their eyes to the actual conditions of life and merely hark back to an ideal past age'. On the contrary, the wealth of words in its repertoire would allow Indians to modernize and scientize without losing their nationality, and without giving up their pride in being Indian, for when Sanskrit is used to create new scientific and technological terminology, 'there is not the slightest feeling that the word is foreign or borrowed'.[86] And for those who doubted that Sanskrit contained words that would be adequate for modern science, Raghavan assured them that 'some of the sciences, in their origins in the West, had their roots in or were intimately connected with Sanskrit . . .' So, why then, he asked, 'should there be any antagonism between science and Sanskrit?' On the contrary, Sanskrit would enable India to be authentically modern and scientific, to be *like* the West without *becoming* the West. The West had hitherto only recognized India's greatness in the spiritual and literary realms. But Sanskritic texts had made fundamental contributions towards the development of the physical sciences and mathematics as well. It was necessary to take stock of these 'for the history of Chemistry or of Mathematics can be fully appreciated only by making a thorough study of the Indian contribution to these subjects [as embodied in Sanskrit] . . .'.[87]

The impossibility of incompatibility between Sanskrit and science also finds frequent expression in the formulation that was widely circulated among many proponents of 'Hindu science', namely, that Sanskrit is the world's most 'scientific' language.[88] So, Raja Ramanna, one of India's leading nuclear physicists and chairman at one time of its Atomic Energy Commission, has published a short pamphlet entitled *Sanskrit and Science* in which he proposed that in its structure, Sanskrit mirrors the structures of mathematics, geometry, and logic. In the same vein, it is proposed that Panini's grammar 'is the first attempt in the history of the human mind to make a sort of "chemical analysis" of a language on scientific lines'; Baudhayana's *sutras* from the sixth century BCE already contain the formula that the world later associated with Pythagoras; and Brahmagupta had discovered in seventh century CE what a thousand years later would

[86] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 79, 197.
[87] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 12; *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 86–7.
[88] For an important analysis of 'Hindu science' as a means through which Hindu/nationalist intellectuals used the authority of science to revalidate their ancient scriptures, and reconfigured Hinduism as 'scientific', see Gyan Prakash, 'The Modern Nation's Return in the Archaic', *Critical Inquiry*, 1997, 23(3), pp. 536–56.

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be rediscovered as the Pellian equation in Europe.[89] So, at this level, Sanskrit enthusiasts appear to be subverting the old Orientalist thematic that runs through nationalist thought as well, namely, that the West was the realm of science, and the East, the abode of the spirit. They argued instead that India, too, had contributed to the sciences, far before the West had, and that a renewed study of Sanskrit would allow both the West and modern Indians to become cognizant of this fact. Sanskrit thus confirmed the authenticity and antiquity of 'Indian' science, even as it provided the linguistic vehicle through which this science could be revived and receive respectability in the modern world.

All the same, the Commission did note that 'every nation has some contribution to make to the sum-total of human civilisation', and that India's unique contribution lay in its special purchase on the meaning of Ultimate Reality which was made available through Sanskrit. 'Sanskrit is a language which through its sonority and mellifluousness has the power to lift us above ourselves . . .'. Because of this power, Sanskrit was a 'potent aid to the formation of character and sense of exaltation'. So, in addition to the role that Sanskrit would play in ensuring pan-Indian cultural and political unity, the language would contribute to the moral, spiritual, and emotional (re)integration of the citizenry into a unified and harmonious whole. Like the ideal Sanskrit scholar, every citizen exposed to Sanskrit would be

> actuated by the Principles of Dharma, and his actions towards all men, towards all living beings as a matter of fact, [would] take a colouring from the principles of *Ahimsa* or non-injury, of *Karuna* or Compassion, and of *Maitri* or Friendly Service. A certain amount of Gentleness of Spirit, of Humility, particularly in the matter of Unseen Forces of Life, of a desire to give to the others their proper due, and an attitude of Tolerance with regard to other people's faith and belief, and above all a certain moral approach and earnestness [would] be noticeable . . .[90]

In the view of the Commission, the Sanskrit pandit was the paradigmatic Indian, the model that every citizen ought to emulate.

So impressed was the Commission with the 'dignity' and 'solemnity' that Sanskrit inevitably bestowed upon all that it touched that it recommended to the Government that the language be

[89] Raja Ramanna, *Sanskrit and Science* (Bombay, 1984).
[90] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, pp. 83–4.

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used widely for all formal state functions. Sanskrit ought to be used for oath-taking by members of Parliament and state legislatures, of electoral colleges as well as other official bodies; the swearing-in ceremonies of the President, governors, ministers, judges, and so on should be conducted in Sanskrit; the sessions of states legislatures and the Parliament, as well as government-sponsored national and international conferences, ought to begin with the recitation of the Rig Vedic humn (X. 191.2–4) which celebrates concord and unanimity, and should conclude with the recitation of another Vedic hymn.[91] Here, it is hard not to conclude that the Commission's statements about the 'dignity' and 'stateliness' of the language were a throwback to older notions about the magical power of Sanskrit words, even as they represent a secular adaptation to the needs of the modern state.

Since the language was filled with so much prestige and dignity, when Indians imbibed its spirit, they, too, would acquire the self-respect, intellectual self-assurance, and self-confidence that they so badly needed to function in today's world:

> Time and often, it has been seen that Indian youth abroad seem to be carried away by the rushing stream of modern life, whether in England or France or Germany or America, and they seem to accept everything on its face-value, if they do not have the sense of balance and the ballast which are furnished by an acquaintance with their own cultural moorings which can be supplied only by Sanskrit and its literature . . .[92]

The Commission therefore recommended that from early childhood, every Indian ought to be taught essential lessons of morality and social conduct through Sanskrit, for the 'importance of Sanskrit as a great stabilizing force in life—as a moral anchor—cannot be emphasized too strongly . . .' Its verses

> breathe a high moral tone and display a precious note of what might be called High and Serious Enlightenment. Persons who are attuned to this spirit through an acquaintance from early childhood with verses of this type, these *Subhasitas* . . . and who have been nurtured in the atmosphere of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, including the *Gita*, and also of the *Upanishads*, have a balanced and cultured outlook upon life both of their own country and of other countries which would be rare to find in those who have been denied all this . . . the message of Sanskrit read or chanted is that of *sursum corda*, 'lift up your hearts'.[93]

[91] *Ibid*., pp. 191–2.
[92] *Ibid*., p. 90.
[93] *Ibid*., p. 84.

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Given this, it is not surprising, Raghavan declared, that even 'from the *śmaśāna* [graveyard] of destroyed values in the West, thinking men are casting their hope-seeking looks eastward, and stretching their hands into Sanskrit's granary for grains of sustaining wisdom . . .'.[94] Like Lakshmikanta Maitra and his colleagues in the Constituent Assembly, Raghavan and his colleagues in the Sanskrit Commission proposed that with the help of Sanskrit, the nation would first regenerate itself, politically, spiritually, and morally. Thus regenerated, India would then rescue and revive all those other unfortunate nations and cultures of the world that had lost their spiritual moorings and their moral anchor.

The Sanskrit Commission's agenda thus was an old nationalist agenda, with an important post-colonial twist. Much of what we hear from its advocates about Sanskrit in the 1950s echoes what many a (Hindu) nationalist had claimed for Hinduism in late colonial India. In what Partha Chatterjee has identified as its 'moment of departure', the national project picked up Hinduism as the means through which to define a distinctive and sovereign cultural identity for the emergent nation, as well as to assert the superiority of India over the materialist West. A revitalized Hinduism would ensure that its citizens would continue to remain Indian even while learning the ways of the West. In what we may characterize as the 'moment of departure' for nationalist thought in independent India, the project remains the same, more or less, but the means of implementing it undergo a radical transformation, on the surface at any rate, as language primarily, and culture and morality, secondarily, are favored over religion. This is not surprising, for the Commission functioned under the mantle of a Constitution that had only recently declared the nation to be 'secular', and submitted its Report in a political climate in which memories of Partition were still vivid, and the anti-Hindu polemics of the Dravidian movement gathering momentum. The spiritual, cultural and moral work of regeneration with which Hinduism had been entrusted in an earlier period, was now thrust upon language, and upon one language in particular, Sanskrit. In that process, the overt connections of the language with Hinduism were severed, even as the content and message of that religion were selectively dredged up to provide the moral and emotional moorings for a nation that was adrift but could hopefully be anchored down by Sanskrit.

[94] Raghavan, *Sanskrit*, p. 13.

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## Sanskritizing the Nation

In 1974, twenty or so years after he had chaired the Sanskrit Commission, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee quoted with approval two Russian scholars who had recently declared that it was hard, even impossible, to imagine India without Sanskrit, and went on to remind Indians, once again, that '*Sanskrit is India*. The progressive Unification of the Indian Peoples into a single Nation can correctly be described as the Sanskritization of India'.[95] So the question remains: to what extent have advocates of Sanskrit succeeded, in the name of national 'regeneration' and 'unification', in Sanskritizing India? Important enough as this question is, it has drawn little scholarly scrutiny, even as the recent extension of support to Sanskrit by Hindu nationalism only reminds us of the urgency of attending to this issue.[96]

As the Sanskrit Commission itself noted with satisfaction, there are many signs of the symbolic importance accorded to Sanskrit in independent India. The Constitution recognizes the nation by its Sanskrit name, Bharata, and the Upanishadic saying, *Satyam eva jayate*, 'truth alone triumphs', has been adopted as the national motto. The national anthem of India, we are told, is 90% Sanskrit and 10% Sanskritic and 'hence is understood all over India'. The Government of India has officially adopted *Sri* and *Srimati* replacing the English Mr and Mrs as honorific forms of address. Various state bodies and agencies—Parliament, All India Radio, the Life Insurance Corporation, and so on—have all adopted mottoes drawn from Sanskrit literature, and even the Indian Navy has taken as its guiding principle the Vedic prayer, *sam no varunah*.[97]

At the institutional level, in 1959, the Government of India appointed the Central Sanskrit Board, made up of Sanskritists and educationalists, as an advisory body that would coordinate state efforts in the development and promotion of Sanskrit. In 1970, this Board was replaced by the more high-powered Kendriya Sanskrit

[95] Chatterjee, *India*, p. 32 (emphasis in original).

[96] In terms that eerily resonate the assertions of the Sanskrit Commission, the Vishva Hindu Parishad declared in a pamphlet published in 1991 that 'to treat the glorious Sanskrit language at par with Arabic, Persian or Urdu is madness' for 'our spirituality is our life-blood, it is the life of our national life. And Sanskrit is the sole reservoir which conserves for us this spirituality, because at the very sound of Sanskrit, the nation receives a kind of glory, power and right'. Accordingly, 'the preservation of Sanskrit' is enjoined to be 'a divine task' (quoted in Bhattacharji, 'New Education Policy', pp. 2641–2).

[97] *Report of the Sanskrit Commission*, p. 71.

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Parishad consisting of representatives from various state governments, central government agencies and ministries, as well as universities. In addition to these agencies, a special branch of the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, called the Sanskrit Division, also deals with government policy on Sanskrit. These agencies have taken as their mandate the implementation of the proposals made by the Sanskrit Commission in 1956, hence the centrality I have accorded in this essay to its report. The schemes undertaken over the next few decades have included cataloguing of rare manuscripts and publishing of numerous text-books and journals in Sanskrit; offering grants-in-aid to voluntary organizations as well as traditional centers of Sanskritic learning; and the improvement of Sanskrit pedagogy in schools and universities. Following the recommendations of the Sanskrit Commission and the central government, numerous state governments as well as the Union Territory of Delhi did make the study of Sanskrit mandatory in schools, and in some universities as well. Additionally, various All-India seminars, Sanskrit elocution contests, Vedic conventions, and so on have been periodically held under government sponsorship. Pension schemes have also been instituted for indigent Sanskrit scholars and scholarships awarded to students. The funds for these ventures have been provided through the various Five-Year Plans which allocated Rs 5 lakhs in 1956, Rs 75 lakhs in 1961 and Rs 2.75 crores in 1969. Not surprisingly, given that the government promised financial remuneration to those institutions undertaking the spread of the language, a dramatic increase in voluntary Sanskrit organizations (from 5 in 1958–59 to 500 in 1970–71) has been noted. These associations conduct private examinations, publish manuals and guides for quick and easy learning of the language, commemorate the birth and death anniversaries of important Sanskrit literary figures, and arrange public lectures. Older centers of Sanskritic learning have also been revamped, and new institutions such as Kendriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha at Tirupati and the Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Kendriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha in New Delhi, were opened in the 1960s, with plans to open other state-supported centers over the next few years.[98]

So, the lamentations of its supporters over the decline in state patronage for Sanskrit during the past few centuries appear therefore to have been answered at last, with the central government itself

[98] *Ibid*., pp. 221–4; *Sanskrit in India* (New Delhi, 1972); Hock, 'Spoken Sanskrit'; Bhate, 'Position of Sanskrit in Public Education', pp. 391–400.

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stepping in as a new and powerful patron. Indeed, as the Sanskrit Commission noted, Sanskrit reaped an important dividend with the reorganization of states on linguistic principles in the 1950s. From then on, the development of India's regional languages became the responsibility of various state governments, whereas Sanskrit, because it was 'state-less' and because it was declared to be key to the maintenance of the nation's integrity, came directly under the patronage of the Center, and stood therefore to benefit from this, materially as well as ideologically. Its supporters still continue to complain that government patronage notwithstanding, the language continues to decline for want of support; that efforts to transform it into an everyday spoken language have all but failed; and that even centers of Sanskritic learning frequently fall back on English, Hindi, or the regional languages to teach Sanskrit.[99] Nonetheless, not least because of the intervention of the Sanskrit Commission and other such organizations, Sanskrit has been assured a visibility in modern India that has been denied to other languages, such as Persian, that have played analogous roles in India's past.

But if Sanskrit has arguably profited from being appropriated by the nation, what gains has the nation made by associating itself with the language? Why indeed have India's nationalizers, or at least some of them, found Sanskrit to be so useful in imagining the nation? As I have suggested, Sanskrit (re)emerges as the 'great unifier' at a time that I have characterized, following Partha Chatterjee, as the moment of departure for the nation on its post-colonial journey. It inherits the task that had been assigned to Hinduism three-quarters of a century ago, a task that had only rendered that religion suspect and illegitimate for any kind of unifying role in independent India. Sanskrit steps into—or is made to occupy—the breach vacated by Hinduism, for like the latter, it too had been identified by more than two centuries of colonial-Orientalist scholarship as the 'essence' of India; it, too, could enable the emergent nation in being like the West without becoming the West. But unlike Hinduism, it had not become directly implicated in the divisive communal politics of the pre-Partition years. The Sanskrit Commission indeed made sure, as we have seen, to disavow all intimacies between Sanskrit and religiosity, and between Sanskrit and Hinduism, instead offering the language to the nation as the repository of its 'culture' and 'morality'.

[99] Hock, 'Spoken Sanskrit'; Bhate, 'Position of Sanskrit in Public Education', pp. 394–5.

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On another level, it is clear that as long as the troubled question of an acceptable official language of the union stands unresolved, Sanskrit will continue to surface as a candidate, if only because, as members of the Constituent Assembly were quick to point out, it is nobody's 'mother tongue', and every Indian is equally disadvantaged with respect to it. So, ironically, this language of high privilege and exclusivity can be put to work as the great leveler of the nation, to ensure that all citizens had an equal start in the race for jobs and benefits. Such a reasoning certainly unsettles the assumption that the nation is about the forging of a 'deep horizontal comradeship', and the subordination of particular interests to the general, the individual to the collective. India's linguistic crisis which turns around the resistance to Hindi as the common link language, reminds us that nationalism is not just about every member of the nation agreeing to put their best foot forward and working towards a common goal, as it is also about ensuring that no one citizen, or group of citizens, has a head start. So, Naziruddin Ahmad was able to stand up in the Constituent Assembly and declare: 'I offer you a language which is the grandest and the greatest, and it is impartially difficult, equally difficult for all to learn'. Sanskrit, on the face of it, the most hierarchical of all languages, would potentially guarantee, in its new incarnation as 'national language', the (linguistic) equality of the nation's citizens.

And yet, as the first part of Ahmad's statement also clearly reveals, Sanskrit's hold on the collective imagination of so many Indians cannot be satisfactorily explained by resorting to this kind of pragmatic, even cynical, reasoning alone. The Sanskrit standard continues to be raised, again and again, because it allows the nation to mask its modernity, its 'astonishing youth', its newness. As Sudipta Kaviraj rightly points out:

> The nation, India ... is a thing without a past. It is radically modern. It can only look for subterfuges of antiquity. It fears to face and admit its own terrible modernity, because to admit modernity is to make itself vulnerable. As a proposal for modern living, on a scale quite unprecedented ..., in a society still knowing only one legitimizing criterion—tradition—it must seek to find past disguises for these wholly modern proposals.[100]

By attaching itself to Sanskrit, the nation can make up for an absence of antiquity by borrowing from Sanskrit's antiquity; it can

[100] Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Imaginary Institution of India', in *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1993), p. 13.

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gloss over its lack of continuity by hiding behind Sanskrit's apparent depth; it can reaffirm its own unity and authenticity by pointing to Sanskrit's claims to unity and authenticity. But, as this essay has sought to demonstrate, the nation's attempt to create an aura of antiquity, autonomy and authenticity for itself by appropriating Sanskrit involves, at the very least, a dramatic recasting of Sanskrit, and its re-presentation to the nation, no longer as the sacred language of one of its communities, but as the language of 'culture' and 'morality' for all its constituents; as not just the repository of ancient 'wit' and 'wisdom', but as the very guarantor of an authentic modern science; and above all, as not just a mandarin language of high privilege and learning, but as an everyday language of even the humblest of its citizens. Such a recasting and re-presentation which underpins what I have referred to as the 'nationalization' of Sanskrit, has not been without its share of contradictions and ironies. Not the least of these, and here I paraphrase Sheldon Pollock, is that this language of the gods and of pristine perfection can assure itself of a place in the modern nation only by mixing it up, so to speak, in the mundane world of mere humans.

## Postscript

Quaint, even absurd, though the claims of the Sanskrit Commission may appear, in its own Report and no doubt in my rendering of these, they clearly are but reflections of the troubling dilemmas of imagining the nation in colonial and post-colonial contexts. The advocates of Sanskrit in the Constituent Assembly and in the Sanskrit Commission, as indeed most Indian nationalists, functioned with the Herderian assumption, inherited from their colonial masters and predecessors, that to be a nation meant the possession of a 'national' langauge that would serve one and all, and that would be the repository of the national essence even as it knitted the community into a unified whole. In forging language policies around such an assumption, nations like India with linguistic pasts that did not approximate those of the West, nevertheless committed themselves to a linguistic trajectory that would bring them in line with Europe's modernity. From this point of view, the Sanskrit Commission's advocacy of Sanskrit seems both subversive and tragic. Subversive because in seeking to revamp an ancient mandarin language that was nobody's 'mother tongue' and institute it as the official language of

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a modern nation, the Commission at least dared to pursue an alternate imagination which did not replicate the historical experience of the West. Tragic because in the end, its advocates made their case by deploying the logic of (western) nationalism and modernity, and by recasting Sanskrit in the image of other national tongues. In the nationalization of Sanskrit, as with so much else in the colonial and post-colonial world, difference struggles with and ultimately loses out to sameness.

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