

The real classical languages debate

A Sanskrit proverb tells us that it is far easier to tear down a house than it is to build it. The great edifice of Indian classical language study and literary scholarship has been nearly torn down. Is it possible, at this late hour, to build it up again?

Sheldon Pollock

I have been observing with extreme bemusement the debate over the classical status of Indian languages, since the issue was first raised in these pages in 2006 in the case of Kannada. Yes of course, it is dangerous to introduce invidious distinctions among languages, and yes of course, the scholarship upon which these distinctions are founded is often empirically thin and theoretically weak. But with respect to the core problem of the debate, I am reminded of what the great poet Bhartrhari said: One should not wait until the house is burning to dig a well (sandipte bhavane tu kupakhananam pratyudyamah kidsrah). And the house of Indian classical language study is not only burning, it lies almost in ashes.

Who cares if language X, Y, or Z is given “classical” status if there is no one who can read it? And if the award of classical status is a means to ensure serious scholarship, then there are a dozen or more languages in India – indeed, the entire pre-modern literary past – that is in desperate need of this recognition.

At the time of Independence, and for some two millennia before that, India was graced by the presence of scholars whose historical and philological expertise made them the peer of any in the world. They produced editions and literary and historical studies of texts in Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu – and in Apabhramsha,

Assamese, Bangla, Brajhasha, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya, Persian, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Urdu – that we still use today. In fact, in many cases their works have not been replaced. This is not because

they are irreplaceable – it is in the nature of scholarship that later knowledge should supersede earlier. They have not been replaced because there is no one to replace them.

Two generations of Indian students have been lost to the study of classical Indian languages and literatures, in part due to powerful economic forces no doubt, but in part due to sheer neglect. The situation is dire. Let me offer a few anecdotes. A great university in the United States with a long commitment to classical Indian studies sought for years to hire a professor of Telugu literature. Not one scholar could be found who commanded the tradition from Nannaya to the present; the one professor of Telugu literature in the U.S. who does have these skills will soon retire, and when he does, classical Telugu studies will retire with him. The same can be said of many other languages, such as Bangla, where the number of scholars who can actually read not just Tagore, but Vaishnav pads or the great seventeenth century biography of Caitanya, the *Caitanyacaritamrta*, are few and far between.

For several years I studied classical Kannada with T.V. Venkatachala Sastry of Mysore, a splendid representative of the kind of historically deep learning I have mentioned. During all my time in Karnataka I did not encounter a single young scholar who had command over the great texts of classical Kannada – Pampa, Ranna, Ponna – to say nothing of reading knowledgeably in the extraordinary inscriptional treasure house that is Karnataka.

Today, in neither of the two great universities in the capital city of India, is anyone conducting research on classical

Hindi literature, the great works of Keshavdas and his successors. Imagine – and this is an exact parallel – if there were no one in Paris in 2008 producing scholarship on the works of Corneille, Racine, and Molière. Not coincidentally, a vast number of Brajhasha texts lie mouldering in archives, unedited to this day.

This is even truer of Indo-Persian literature. Large quantities of manuscripts, including *divans* of some of the great court poets of Mughal India, remain unpublished and unread. When I ask knowledgeable friends about the state of the field, I hear them speak of great scholars in their 80s – and almost no one younger.

Two year ago, I attend a large conference in Udaipur on the present state and future prospects of the humanities in India. I asked the more than one hundred delegates there, some of the best literary scholars in the country, how many of them actually train their students to read literary texts in an Indian language. Three people raised their hand, all Sanskrit teachers.

Nine years ago, H.C. Bhayani, the great scholar of Apabhramsha, passed away. With his death, so far as I am able to judge, the field of Apabhramsha studies itself died in India. To my eyes, the situation with Apabhramsha is symptomatic of a vast cultural ecocide that is underway in this country. And not just language knowledge is disappearing but all the skills associated with it, such as the capacity to read non-modern scripts, from Brahmi to Modi to Shikhasta.

To be sure, I have not systematically canvassed every university in India, and there are undoubtedly some exceptions

to the trend I am sketching. But by no means do I think it even remotely an exaggeration to suggest that within two generations, the Indian literary past – one of the most luminous contributions ever made to human civilisation – may be virtually unreadable to the people of India.

There is another Sanskrit proverb that tells us it is far easier to tear down a house than to build it up (asakto ham grharambhe sakto ham grhabhanjane). The great edifice of Indian literary scholarship has nearly been torn down. Is it possible, at this late hour, to build it up again? India has shown itself capable of achieving pre-eminence in anything it sets its mind to. Consider the Indian Institutes of Management, of Science, and of Technology. Universities and companies and organisations around the world compete for the graduates of the IIMs, IISs, IITs. Why should India not commit itself to build the same kind of institute to serve the needs of its culture – not just dance and art and music, but its literary culture? Why should it not build an Indian Institute of the Humanities devoted not just to revivifying the study of the classical languages, but to producing world-class scholarship, as a demonstration of what is possible, a model for universities to follow, and a source of new scholars to staff those universities? It is not too late. The reward of success would be incalculable; the cost of failure would be catastrophic.

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