

LANGUAGE AS CULTURAL POLITICS: COLONIAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to argue that language plays a pivotal role in establishing cultural and political domination of a certain class/caste. Language becomes, at a certain juncture, instrument of domination for the caste/class elites, and, colonial masters, accompanied by native elites, too used this instrument to subjugate the colonized masses. The present paper underscores the cultural arguments built by the well-known historian Braj Ranjan Mani regarding the role of Indian elites as complicit in the phenomenon of cultural colonization through the politics of language.*

Keywords: *Sanskrit, hegemony, language, politics, cultural colonization.*

Politics of language has been at the very root of hegemonic cultural construct in colonial India, because linguistic superiority and domination is always a prerequisite in the process of colonization. Cultural domination is always necessary to perpetuate political domination, the principle was seriously considered by the Aryan invaders while ruling the native masses in Indian subcontinent. Aryan invaders, by creating religious scriptures in Sanskrit language, not only established linguistic supremacy but perpetuated cultural hegemony also. It means, Sanskrit played a vital role in bringing out the hegemony of Brahmanic culture. In fact, India has been witnessing perennial conflict between Sanskrit and Prakrit languages, Brahman and Shraman culture and religion. Sanskrit has been acclaimed as the language of religion and language of God, and, it is controlled by Brahmins, the most dominant Varna in Indian context. But the interesting fact remains is, it never became the language of the masses, and never close to the heart of them. The basic reason behind that was, this language was impenetrable and unintelligible to the masses as they were prohibited from the access to it. Therefore, Sanskrit never became the beloved language of the masses in India.

The argument built up in this paper is based on the cultural and historical facts unveiled by eminent historian Braj Ranjan Mani. In every society we witness two streams of culture- one dominant and other subordinate culture, and both the cultures never live amicably in history and in present scenario. They are always in conflict. As the cultures enter into conflict so the languages. Every language is the conductor of that specific culture through which it emerges. Brahmanic culture and Shramanic culture, in Indian context, find their expression through their respective languages, i.e. Brahman used Sanskrit for their scriptural and religious articulation and, Shraman expressed through Pali and other Prakrit languages. Sanskrit, though declared as classical language in modern times, was in fact, never the language of the masses. Rather, it was the privilege of the Bhū-devas (Brahmins). In colonial regime, Sanskrit was glorified by the orientalist, because, it was necessary for the British to do so in order to colonize and rule the country. In connection of this argument let us focus on some of the historical facts which serve as the inevitable grounding for the phenomenon of colonization.

Generally, European masters are solely blamed for the colonization of Indian subcontinent, but, historical facts narrate some different stories, which have seldom discussed in the history curricula. East India Company slowly devoured this vast land and exposed the hypocrisy and decadence of political leadership of India. Braj Ranjan Mani makes pertinent comment in this regard, “The feudal kings and nobles with an exception of a Tipu here or there were too self-indulgent, weak or myopic to ward off the external attack. In fact, many of them schemed against each other, cooperated and collaborated with the

British for self-gains, and thus helped establish British supremacy.” (2005, 188) India, in the beginning of colonization was not having the collective, comprehensive and uniform identity as a nation. It was just a conglomeration of many kingdoms which were against one another. Therefore, these kings and nobles and elites created a fertile land for British colonization. Indian masses, on the other hand, were in no position to make any counter attack or resist this British conquest of their land. Indian masses have been suffering from caste discrimination, poverty, upper caste domination. British colonization, for the masses, was nothing but shifting of power, from upper caste natives to British masters. Therefore, British very soon established their domination with active and significant support from the opportunist Indian elites- Hindus and Muslims. Mani argues, “It is axiomatic that no external power can establish an enduring domination over a conquered people except with the latter's tacit toleration or active support, and the colonial conquest of India was no exception to this.”(189). In fact British failed to take into consideration other native cultural and religious traditions in Indian society. They acknowledged only Brahmans as the cultural leaders of India. British and Brahmans, belonging to the dominant ideologies respectively, collaborated together. It was truly convenient on the part of British to seek support from the Brahmans to perpetuate hegemony on the masses and colonize this country.

Indian and British orientalist jointly invented the organic affinity between Sanskrit and European languages, this was one of the striking happenings in the process of colonization of India. As mentioned earlier, language plays decisive role in perpetuating the ideology of hegemony, and, Sanskrit played this role immaculately, not just in terms of Brahman domination but British colonization too. Institutional endeavors were made to establish the relationship between Sanskrit and European languages. Aryan race theory served as the essential tool to reach to the Brahmans. On this basis, common Indo-European heritage was discovered. British historians and linguists engaged in the pursuit of bringing out resemblances between Sanskrit and European languages and Indo-European cultural past. Nathaniel Halhed translated many Sanskrit texts like *Bhagwat Purana* and *Shiv Purana* into English. Asiatic Society of Bengal was established in 1784 under the leadership of William Jones, which enabled British and other European scholars and intellectuals to study Indian culture, literature and religion. European scholars showed deep interest in Indian culture and religious texts, and carried their research through the institutions like Bombay Asiatic Society and Asiatic Society of Great Britain. Braj Ranjan Mani writes:

Hastings' academic protégés William Jones, Charles Wilkins, H. T. Colebrooke, and James Prinsep learnt Sanskrit and many other things from the Pundits, and engaged in research on India, mainly through the ancient Sanskrit texts. Wilkins published a Sanskrit grammar in 1779, and rendered the *Bhagwat Gita* into English in 1785. This was the first published translation of any major Sanskrit work into a European language. Jones, a gifted linguist and scholar, soon established himself as a renowned Sanskrit scholar and translated the *Manusmriti* and Kalidasa's *Abhijnanshakuntalam* into English. (192)

William Jones received recognition as an authority on Indian religion and culture. Most significant fact is that he wrote a seminal paper on the origin and families of nations. The paper brought into light many striking resemblances between Sanskrit and European languages like Latin and Greek. Jones' work has been acclaimed as the starting point in the domain of comparative philology. Out of these linguistic and cultural research the Aryan race theory emerged and gained currency. The Indian and European orientalist used this theory in order to underline and establish blood relationship between Aryan and European ancestry. The idea of common ancestry of Indo-Europeans stimulated the imagination of many contemporary scholars. The upper caste elites considered to be the lost brothers of the white Europeans. After acquiring the common identity with colonial rulers, upper caste Indians started to stringently observe the distinction between master race, the high caste Brahmans and the low caste non Aryans. Keshavchandra Sen at a public lecture, as Thapar puts, declared in 1877 that “..... in the advent of the English nation in India we see a reunion of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the

ancientAryan Race.”(1975, 12)

The entire discourse of establishing common ancestral and racial roots of Aryans and Europeans categorically proves the pernicious agenda of both, Indian upper caste elites and the European colonizers, to hegemonize the poor masses in India. European scholars such as H. H. Wilson, C. Lassen, Colebrooke, Monier Williams and Friedrich Max Muller gave birth and popularized to the idealistic and mysterious legend of India as the wonder, and took deep interest in ancient Aryan culture and Sanskrit texts. They created the romantic image of Indian culture. Such interest and glorification by Europeans excited the upper caste elites. Thus, Sanskrit was used as the major tool in order to identify cultural-racial roots. Indian upper caste elites had been boasting of Sanskrit and Vedic scriptures, which was supported and glorified by the Europeans because they knew that the designs and strategies of colonization would not be brought into reality without understanding and glorifying Sanskrit language and literature. Through the joint endeavor, Indian upper castes elites and British perpetuated the hegemony over ignorant lower caste masses. It may be argued, therefore, that Indian elites were equally responsible to preserve colonial rule, and Sanskrit played the pivotal role in the whole colonial drama of cultural power politics.

Works cited

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