

# The 'Classical' Language Issue

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We need to remind ourselves that classical language status is not a matter for the State to decide. It is best left to scholars, even though they are not immune from politics, to identify what is classical and what is not. Further the assignation of such a status based on accepted scholarly standards to any language should not also mean the “inferiorisation” of other languages.

“A language”, the Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich is said to have observed, “is a dialect with an army and a navy”. To extend this cynical definition, a classical language would be any Indian language that is so notified by a weak-kneed central government in a fractured polity. With the recent notification of Kannada and Telugu as classical languages by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-led government of India, the floodgates for similar demands for other languages have been opened. Demands for Malayalam as a classical language too have now joined the chorus.

We know that Orientalism, born out of the colonial encounter, profoundly mutated our attitude to language(s). Out of this, for instance, was born the notion of the “mother tongue” which concretised a new affective relationship to one’s own language and has led to large-scale social movements. Similar to this is the category of “classical languages” – the word for this term in Indian languages, much like for “the mother tongue”, is a neologism. In the Middle Ages, the recognition of Greek and Latin as classical languages paralleled the growth of various, now recognised as modern, European languages which came to be designated as vernaculars.

The Orientalist discovery of the Indo-European family of languages greatly altered the status of Sanskrit which, given its newly-discovered linkages to Greek and Latin, soon came to be recognised as classical. So much so that Sanskrit’s putative position as the fountainhead of Indian civilisation now seems to be taken for granted in the popular mind. The colonial government officially sanctioned this recognition by granting titles to scholars as part of its annual “new year” honours. Invariably such titles were cornered by Sanskrit scholars even though Pali, Arabic and Persian were not exempt. Rare indeed was a Tamil scholar (the exceptions were U V Swaminatha Iyer and M Kathiresan Chettiar) who got the *mahamahopadhyaya* title for her/his linguistic achievements.

(And I doubt if scholars in the languages which later came to be included in the eighth schedule of the Constitution of India were ever so honoured.)

## The Colonial Encounter

The long-standing intellectual rivalry between Tamil and Sanskrit was reconfigured during the colonial encounter. The formulations of William Jones and the Calcutta school of Orientalism which argued that all Indian languages were offshoots of Sanskrit was challenged within a generation by scholars based at the College of Fort St George, led by Francis Whyte Ellis (which is the subject of Thomas Trautmann’s brilliant monograph *Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras* (2006)). This theory of a distinct family of south Indian or Dravidian family of languages was intellectually fleshed out by Robert Caldwell, with all its political implications, in his magisterial *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Family of Languages* (1856). Both linguistics and politics have not been the same since. The “Aryan” and the “Dravidian” came to be defined antithetically, and linguistic difference came to heavily influence political mobilisation. The rediscovery of Tamil sangam classics and their canonisation fuelled this process.

The demand for recognising Tamil as a classical language was made quite early – even at the turn of the 20th century – by scholars such as V G Suryanarayana Sastri, professor of Tamil at Madras Christian College, in his work on the history of the Tamil language (1903). This demand was reiterated continually at many academic and intellectual forums. In the post-second world war context when area studies began to replace indology, Tamil counter-vailed against Sanskrit in many American universities. Tamil was seen to offer a view of India that was different to the one seen through the lens of Sanskrit. Even though the world of scholarship had recognised Tamil as a classical language, a persistent demand from Tamil Nadu was made to the Indian State to give this an official status. The clamour for being classical is most certainly a colonial hangover, marked by an anxiety to be recognised by the world (read, the west). This popular and political demand for what was really an academic fait accompli

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can be understood only in the context of politics in post-independence Tamil Nadu.

### Language and Identity Politics

Over the last century, as Tamil identity politics grew even as political parties simultaneously accommodated themselves within strong union governments, the demand for official classical language status to Tamil became strident. The issue of “status” took the place of “substance”. This was especially so after 1989 when regional parties – especially the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) – began to have a big say in the formation of governments at the centre. In the wake of the unprecedented electoral sweep of the DMK-led alliance in the 2004 parliamentary elections in Tamil Nadu, the classical language status was one of the more easily conceded demands made by an assertive DMK. It was quickly granted by a Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) notification dated 12 October 2004.

Notwithstanding the genuine claim of Tamil for the recognition of such a status, that this move was political was never in doubt. While the DMK went overboard in claiming credit, the AIADMK, then heading the government in the state, was tight-lipped. The subsequent developments only reinforced the political character of this concession. The constitution and composition of the various expert committees for classical Tamil bears this out. To give just one instance, a member of one of the committees resigned when she was denied the DMK ticket to contest the 2006 Lok Sabha elections.

This apart, many interesting facts emerged during the process leading up to the MHRD notification and after. This was the first time in history that a language had been designated a classical language by the writ of the State. Despite repeated assertions that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) had clearly laid out the criteria – of antiquity, serenity, idealism, universality, humanism, etc – for identifying classical languages it became clear that no such document existed. Further, no earlier order of the government of India which recognised Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic and Persian was found. In fact, in a strange inversion, Sanskrit was officially notified as a classical language only after

Tamil even if for all practical purposes Sanskrit always enjoyed preferential state treatment. More disturbingly, the nature of the notification patently lent itself to manipulation. The perception that norms had been diluted to accommodate future claims, which emerged from even a simple reading of the notification, was not without substance. While the widely accepted scholarly criterion for antiquity was the existence of early texts of 2,000 years, the 2004 notification had watered it down to only a 1,000 years. Only after the intervention of the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, M Karunanidhi, it is said that this was revised to 1,500-2,000 years. Clearly the government of India was preparing to undermine the question, much like the way the Mandal Commission issue and reservation have been handled in the recent past.

### A Pandora's Box

The MHRD's notification with whittled-down criteria has to be seen in context. In recent years, largely as a reaction to Tamil claims, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have been demanding the status of classical language for Kannada and Telugu. Unfortunately, Karnataka's response to Tamil Nadu matters seems to be largely coloured by the Cauvery river dispute. Karnataka's positions remind one of the biblical story of the contested child in Solomon's court. In such a politically-charged situation, truth

has been a casualty. For example, the renowned epigraphist, Iravatham Mahadevan, arguably the world's leading expert on the Indus and the Brahmi scripts has pointed out how his comments have been distorted by Andhra Pradesh in putting forward Telugu's claim to classical language status. The government of Karnataka has also openly accused Tamil Nadu of trying to sabotage the government of India's move to confer the status.

The classical language issue has long crossed the portals of the scholarly world. A suit is pending in the Madras High Court against granting classical status to Kannada and Telugu. The UPA government, in keeping with its consistent policy of appeasing every vociferous group, has now gone ahead and notified Kannada and Telugu. The response of the Kerala government has been interesting. V S Achuthanandan, the chief minister of Kerala, while stating that Malayalis did not grudge this status being given to Sanskrit and Tamil, demanded that Malayalam not be left out were Kannada and Telugu to be notified. Interestingly, *The Hindu*, which had largely kept silent on this matter, published an edit-page article by M A Baby, Kerala's education minister, putting forward Malayalam's case.

At this rate it might not be long before every scheduled and unscheduled language becomes classical provided the respective linguistically organised-state can

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sufficiently threaten the central government in providing that status.

### **Scholars' Domain**

We need to remind ourselves that classical language status is not a matter for the State to decide. It is best left to scholars, even though they are not immune from politics, to identify what is classical and what is not. Further the assignation of such a status based on accepted scholarly standards to any language should not also mean the "inferiorisation" of other languages. This should be kept in mind in a context when the world is speaking of the death of languages, India is in a peculiar situation where many "tribal" languages are experiencing a new wave literacy and writing, and are in a sense being reborn.

Apart from its symbolism, on the ground, classical language status translates

itself into substantial funds and awards. The solution to vexed claims and counter-claims for classical language status may therefore rest to an extent in the government of India giving up its partisan patronage of Sanskrit and Hindi, and providing such wherewithal to all languages. Similarly, respective state governments can easily fund any amount of language and cultural development without depending on central government funds. Surely revamping our universities and research institutions is more important than chasing the chimera of the "classical". A case in point here is that the academic structures in Tamil Nadu have not been able to absorb the sudden influx of central government largesse. Unfortunately the classical language claims have only served to sidestep the real issues plaguing linguistic scholarship in India. In a recent

intervention in this debate Sheldon Pollock, the distinguished American Sanskritist, has pointed out how certain linguistic scholarly traditions are dying in this country. One can only extend this worrying diagnosis. How many scholars are there, say, who are proficient in both Sanskrit and Tamil, or in more than one Dravidian language? Is it possible now for a scholar in one Indian language to negotiate through another Indian language without the mediation of English? Do we have a new generation of epigraphists to continue the task of deciphering inscriptions being discovered everyday? Surely these are signs of a serious epistemological crisis.

Ultimately, languages, classical or not, are the storehouses of human knowledge, and constitute the heritage and patrimony of the entire humanity.