

META-NARRATIVE OF SANSKRIT IN INDIAN ENGLISH WRITINGS

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Abstract:

Sanskrit has been the primary language and the receptacle of sublime expressions in early India. The language became an object of engagement for Indologists and Orientalists who began a series of translations of Sanskrit works in English and initiated an association that subsequently culminated in form of Indian English Writings. The gradual absorption of English in Indian culture became partly accountable for rendering original works of Sanskrit inaccessible due to incomprehensibility as well as distortions in translations and cultural misrepresentations. Yet, it was also the chief reason why crucial works of the Sanskrit tradition survived. It is in this context that this research paper analyses Sanskrit as an enduring source of influence in the genesis of the canonical tradition of Indian Writings in English.

Keywords: Sanskrit Metanarrative, Indian English Writings

Introduction

Indian English literature owes its origins to the dynamic tradition of Sanskrit literature in a significant way. Many of us today esteem Sanskrit as a glorious piece of heritage in need of preservation, rather than a language of practice. We can hardly feel the presence of Sanskrit influence in our enduring body of present-day writings, even though it continues to inspire and shape the thought pattern of our expression in contemporary languages of parlance, most significantly in Indian English.

The cannon of Sanskrit literature archived in the abundant storehouse of texts of Indian mythology and philosophy has been a silent shaping influence that survives as the Sanskrit meta-narrative of Indian writings in English.

Sanskrit was the primary, and so to speak, the dominant Indian language which provided a vent for the rendition of the most sublime thoughts during the nascent years of our blooming civilisation. Despite its significant status, the archives of Sanskrit literature as it exists today, stand altered by a series of scrutiny and translations by well-meaning in-house and overseas Indologists. The surviving body of translations is further being modified by a sequence of modern retellings and alternative histories narrated in English. The rendition of Sanskrit myths in English has come a long way from the times of William Jones and Max Muller; to Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu; to Raja Rao and Girish Karnard; and finally, to contemporary information age authors like Amish Tripathi and Devdutt Pattanaik.

The efforts of European Orientalists and Indologists towards a keen evolving sense of interest in Sanskrit literature became an imperative starting point for the saga of the Sanskrit influence over writings in English. Among their diverse array of oriental motifs, malignant and otherwise, what is often not stressed upon is their

curious spirit of fascination, searching for common points of similarity, culminating in the synthesis with recognition of Sanskrit as the mother of their Origin.

The conception of Sanskrit as the root or mother of Indo-European languages, which emerged out of the Indo-European encounter became a key hypothesis. Despite the initial sense of curiosity and admiration, the encounter produced its own shades of 'effects and afflicts'.

The encounter impacted the dynamic tradition of Sanskrit literature in a significant manner. Sanskrit had been the primary language of expression, for almost entire India, for nearly three thousand years. The ancient Sanskrit literature, traced back to the very first treatises, was transmitted orally through the guru-shishya mode. It culminated in the Golden Age of Indian literature, which encompasses the sublime body of Vedic literature. With progression in time, Sanskrit underwent a metamorphosis across the ages. Max Muller has asserted that Sanskrit "went to sleep" for seven centuries from the rise of Buddhism in the fourth century B. C. to the establishment of the Gupta Empire during the fourth century A. D.

The European encounter with Sanskrit in the eighteenth century revolutionized the Indo-European studies and opened doors for the appraisal of Sanskrit language and literature by Western scholars. This chartered the course of study and development of the Indo-European languages, comparative philology and modern linguistics. They postulated the Proto-Indo-European theory of language, which offered the view that - around the fourth millennium BCE, the single parent language, Sanskrit, broke apart to give birth to the more ancient languages of the group, which continued to branch into sub-groups.

The German philologist Jacob Grimm classified Aryan languages into a family of sister languages with one common mother tongue and postulated what is now popularly known as Grimm's Law. A considerable number of inquisitive European Indologists and Orientalists began to study and explore the annals of Sanskrit literature.

Prominent Indologists like Sir William Jones, Max Muller, Arthur A. Macdonell, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, Rudolf Roth and several German Indologists began to study and translate works of Sanskrit in English. The development saw the dawn of reflections of Sanskrit in English and heralded what would eventually take shape of a cannon of Indian writing in English stemming from the germ of Sanskrit core of influence that would grow increasingly diminished in successive rounds of renditions.

The convention of Sanskrit ideas being penned in English initially began with the colonial aim of producing a body of literature about the Hindus, their religion, society, beliefs, science and so forth. It was in part motivated by a conscious or sub-conscious desire to contain and control the Indians, as asserted by Edward Said (Orientalism) and other post-colonial critics. The British administrators in India were aware of the fact that an understanding of Indians and knowledge of native legal, philosophical, and religious traditions could play an important role in the efficient administration of the empire over such an extensive country and its people. This 'nativist approach', advocated by the 'Orientalists,' was in opposition to the ideas of the 'Anglicists,' who argued for the imposition of modern, rational, British legal codes throughout the empire. The 'nativist approach' relied on what Antonio Gramsci would call, "consented coercion".

Religious motives with respect to the conversion to Christianity, particularly Catholic faith, also cannot be ruled out. Pope Honorius IV, for instance, was among the first of the few to have encouraged the study of oriental languages as an aid to missionary work.

Several interest groups, each working with different motives, sometimes overlapping each other contributed to the redefinition of Sanskrit thoughts in English. On one side there were administrators, missionaries and so many others, who operated as Orientalists with an allied agenda. On the other end, there were Sanskritists and theosophists, driven by curious wonder and fascination for the Orient. Thus, the so-called malignant-motive-

seekers, were also accompanied by a group, seeking a genuine spirit of inquiry, comprising well-meaning European scholars and researchers.

The Orientalists studied Sanskrit and published highly influential works on Indian philosophy, religion and mythology. They disseminated Indian philosophical thought far and wide in Europe. Even though the translation of the Sanskrit texts into English led to the dissemination of Indian inspiration to the world outside the boundaries of our own existence, the transition had its own cost. The distress of sacrificing the sanctity of the Sanskrit language itself through a translation resulted in a sacrosanct denial of the translated texts. The concerns can well be comprehended with respect to a similar approach of the Roman clergy towards the translation of the Bible from Latin to English. Despite the sacred implications, the Indologists were instrumental in the literal preservation of several texts from scattered manuscripts and the consolidation of tales of the oral tradition. It cannot be totally ruled out that, without crucial preservation, some of these texts may have passed to obscurity or may have lost their well-documented form. However, the transmission of knowledge with respect to translation is not possible without its transmutation.

Scientific orientalists, who painstakingly studied several Sanskrit manuscripts to establish their meaning with regard to history, discredited the work of theosophists with disdain. They accused the theosophists of altering both the meaning and purpose of the works, by reintroducing a sacred dimension into the texts. The scientific Sanskritists had tried to bring precision and clarity into texts by eradicating, “confusion” and “obscurity” associated with the sacred dimension. It is ironic that the aspects akin to the idea of Keat’s negative capability, were the hallmark of the mistakenly compromised context.

A.W. Enlwisle writes in *An Introduction to Indian Historiography*:

Foreign scholars have often complained about India's lack of an indigenous tradition of historiography. India possesses an enormous heritage of literature accumulated over the centuries, much of it relating to past events, yet there has never been a historian to compare with those of ancient Greece and Rome, or later European scholars who contributed to the development of history as a discipline. Indifference to the western conception of history, to the idea that man can be its subject and agent, actively working to change the human condition, is cited as a distinguishing trait of Indian civilization...

The translated texts produced by many Sanskritists compromised the mythological, metahistorical and archetypal aspects of the source texts, howsoever in an innocent pursuit of clarity. Further, modern historians accuse oriental historiography for taking into account the elite forms, such as academic or governmental, without examining their links with more real, influential but marginal causes. They did not take into account the inherent ambivalence as well as the diversity of the oriental discourse and presented a distorted picture. Needless to mention that modern historians such as Wendy Doniger, have examined Sanskrit texts themselves in relation to Brahmin hegemony towards other casts and women and have received a reciprocal reprimand.

The growing bond between Sanskrit and English took a new turn in late January 1835, when Lord Macaulay unleashed his ill-reputed *Minutes on Education*, asserting that Indian vernaculars and mother tongues were inadequate for providing modern higher education. His views were marked with a bitter disregard for Sanskrit: But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. (“Extracts from Lord Macaulay’s *Minute on Education*, 1835” Lord Macaulay).

Eventually, English became the expanding medium of instruction, which began to displace the fascinating language that the Orientalists approached with awe and wonder. It can also not be denied that the Anglican Indian social reformers were themselves receptive to English education and learning. The Indian system of Sanskrit language and education was soon giving way to instruction through the medium of English.

The Anglicizing phase in India thus began with the revival of Sanskrit literature. Even though Sanskrit apparently got “displaced”, it continued to rekindle in a veil behind the new spirit of learning. Just as young India, awaked to maturing knowledge and learning, it retained the Sanskrit nostalgia ceaselessly. It is at this point that the saga of Sanskrit rendition began to play a new tune through a new medium. India witnessed a class of authors who penned their thoughts in nascent English even while retaining the developed spiritual nodes of knowledge from the parent pedagogy of Sanskrit. Indian writings began recalling familiar tales of the past, told in a new tongue. The Indian spirit of renaissance was engrossed in searching herself, seeking its identity from the ideals of the ‘Golden Age’ till it finally reawakened as the great Shakti, which was the driving force of the National Freedom Movement. While the outer reawakening came from contact with English, the fiery inner core was truly Indian. The propeller, the burning fuel that drove Indian writings in English, significantly stemmed from the veiled classical inspiration of Indian works a significant part of which were authored in Sanskrit .

It is ironic that a large part of the accessible body of Sanskrit literature that we have today is available to us in English translation. Indian English literature has a strong history of mythic associations with Sanskrit literature. The early Indian English writers may alternatively be evaluated in the context of an awakened search for the lost Sanskrit identity through English.

Henry Louis Vivian Deriozio, who is regarded as the first Indian English poet was inspired by the French Revolution and its ideals. Western thought awakened him and the English tongue gave him expression but it is the spirit of the Indian patriot for which we remember him as a poet today.

In his most prescribed poem, *The Harp of India*, he bemoans the lost glory of India and desires to reclaim it. Though he resonates in the style of Byron and Moore, he sings of the splendor of loss. The harp, like India remains in a forlorn condition lying unstrung on a withered bough, bound in the fatal chain of silence. He invokes the musicians of the past whose worthy hands once created many sweet melodies on the harps and wishes:

...but if thy notes divine
May be by mortal wakened once again,
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!

In his sonnet *To India – My Native Land*, included in *The Fakir of Jungheera* Deriozio sings recalling his glorious past. He imagines India as a goddess with a halo of glory and sings:

My country, in thy days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow
And worshipped as a deity

Well-let me dive into the depths of time
And bring from out the ages that have rolled
A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime
Which human eye may never more behold.

Likewise, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, is well remembered for his emblematic Sanskrit-Bangla song *Bande Matara*, which became the emotional beat of the Swadeshi Movement and was honored as the ‘national song of India’. In this song, Chatterjee personifies India as our biological ‘mother’ as well as the supreme Mother. The song is enactment of the ancient ritual of ‘Bhoomi Pooja’ (worship of land) in the form of a cultural custom or sacred religious ceremony.

Chatterjee identifies the motherland so perceived with the three aspects of Shakti. He perceives her as goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Durga as a destroyer of foes, with her “ten weapons of war” symbolizing national valour and conquest of evil; Lakshmi or Kamala symbolizing the nation’s abundance and prosperity; and Saraswati or Vani symbolizing the abundance of the nation’s learning, knowledge and wisdom. The song is a testimony to the classical Indian philosophy that the elevation of the individual-self, with the national-self and finally with the divine-Self can lead to realization of the best-Self (Purna Manushyatva or full humanity). The song brings about this synthesis through: the ‘mother’; ‘motherland’; and the ‘Mother’ and proclaims :

Thou art knowledge, thou art conduct,
thou art heart, thou art soul,
for thou art the life in our body.
In the arm thou art might, O Mother,
in the heart, O Mother, thou art love and faith,
it is thy image we raise in every temple. (4)

The spirit of writing in Indian English has been pervaded by the sensibility of Sanskrit literary tradition. The canon of expression in Indian English began with the encounter with the Indologists and Orientalists. Eventually, English gained currency as the common link language of parlance and expression. Yet, the tradition of Sanskrit literature remains a strong force of shaping influence over the enduring body of expressions in Indian English writings.

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