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Patrick McCartney

Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Japan

Nanzan University Anthropological Institute, Nagoya, Japan

Organization for Identity and Cultural, Development (OICD), Kyoto, Japan

South and Southeast Asian Studies, Department, Australian National University, Australia

South Asia Research Institute (SARI), Australian National University, Australia

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Patrick McCartney^a

^a*Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Japan*

^b*Nanzan University Anthropological Institute, Nagoya, Japan*

^c*Organization for Identity and Cultural, Development (OICD), Kyoto, Japan*

^d*South and South-east Asian Studies, Department, Australian National University, Australia*

^e*South Asia Research Institute (SARI), Australian National University, Australia*

Abstract

Sanskrit is considered by many devout Hindus and global consumers of yoga alike to be an inspirational, divine, ‘language of the gods’. For 2000 years, at least, this middle Indo-Aryan language has endured in a post-vernacular state, due, principally, to its symbolic capital as a liturgical language. This presentation focuses on my almost decade-long research into the theo-political implications of reviving Sanskrit, and includes an explication of data derived from fieldwork in ‘Sanskrit-speaking’ communities in India, as well as analyses of the language sections of the 2011 census; these were only released in July 2018. While the census data is unreliable, for many reasons, but due mainly to the fact that the results are self reported, the towns, villages, and districts most enamored by Sanskrit will be shown.

The hegemony of the Brahminical orthodoxy quite often obfuscates the structural inequalities inherent in the hierarchical varṇa-jātī system of Hinduism. While the Indian constitution provides the opportunity for groups to speak, read/write, and to teach the language of their choice, even though Sanskrit is afforded status as a scheduled (i.e. recognised language that is offered various state-sponsored benefits) language, the imposition of Sanskrit learning on groups historically excluded from access to the Sanskrit episteme urges us to consider how the issue of linguistic human rights and glottophagy impact on less prestigious and unscheduled languages within India’s complex linguistic ecological area where the state imposes Sanskrit learning.

The politics of representation are complicated by the intimate relationship between consumers of global yoga and Hindu supremacy. Global yogis become ensconced in a quite often ahistorical, Sanskrit-inspired thought-world. Through appeals to purity, tradition, affect, and authority, the unique way in which the Indian state reconfigures the logic of neoliberalism is to promote cultural ideals, like Sanskrit and yoga, as two pillars that can possibly create a better world via a moral and cultural renaissance. However, at the core of this political theology is the necessity to speak a ‘pure’ form of Sanskrit. Yet, the Sanskrit spoken today, even with its high and low registers, is, ultimately, various forms of hybrids influenced by the substratum first languages of the speakers. This leads us to appreciate that the socio-political components of reviving Sanskrit are certainly much more complicated than simply getting people to speak, for instance, a Sanskritised register of Hindi.

Keywords: Sanskrit, Spoken Sanskrit, Political Theology, Hindu Supremacism, Global Yoga

Since the 2011 Census data related to ‘mother tongues’ was released late in 2018, it has been a long wait to dive into the publicly–available raw data (Government of India, 2019a, b; Census India, 2019; India Votes, 2019). Viparyāsa refers to the act of imagining something to be real or true when it is quite likely to be untrue. Saṃskṛta-aviparyāsa refers to the general aim of this Imagining Sanskrit Land project, which is to put the phenomenon of ‘Sanskrit villages’ into proper perspective and uncover the realities of spoken Sanskrit, and, in so doing, gain further clarity regarding the complex sociolinguistic context of ethno–nationalist imaginaries and global yoga consumption–scapes, within which, Sanskrit, lives. To this end, we explore the intersection of tradition and modernity, in relation to trans-cultural dialogues; as well as literal spoken dialogue in, and about, the so-called, devabhāṣā (‘divine’ language).

For many people, Sanskrit is considered ‘the oldest language in the world’ (Caron, 2019). This is because it apparently has many ‘divine features’ (Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, 2018). As the ‘only language of the entire universe,’ which was supposedly polluted after the Mahābhārata war that ‘shattered’ the ‘Global Vedic Culture,’ or, rather, the ‘Vaidik i.e. universal empire of Hindus’ (Sanskriti, 2018); Sanskrit’s biography is fascinating. A very popular conception of Sanskrit within the global yoga consumption-scape is, as the ‘original language of yoga’ (Feuerstein, 2017) that contains ‘must-learn lingo for yogis’ (Yoga Journal Editors, 2017). Knowledge claims, such as these, fuse together to create a web of belief constructed by popular opinions and uncritical, essentialised assumptions.

To balance these ahistorical claims, there are several popular pseudoscientific assertions (Giuffrida, 2013), like: ‘The phonetics of Sanskrit, which is the only language that uses all the nerves of the tongue, trigger various energy points in the body, which causes blood circulation to improve and raises the chakras (energy levels)’. The perception is that Sanskrit is ‘sacred’ (Lowitz and Datta, 2004) and, as a result, it can help ‘heal yourself, heal the world’ (King, 2017). This is because it is believed that the ‘Sanskrit Effect’ (Hartzell, 2018) can increase cognitive function, as well as purify the subconscious, as it is supposedly central to the ‘science of enlightenment’ (Young, 2016). We are informed that this will lead to the ‘evolution of consciousness’ (Osborn and O’Hara, 2010) as, apparently, it is the ‘next step in social spiritual development’ (Knapp, 2007).

The majority of people who identify as first, second or third–language Sanskrit speakers live in urban, as opposed to rural, parts of, predominately, north India. The reality of the ‘Sanskrit-speaking village’ is not supported by the census data. Also, key development indicators expose a below average ability for Sanskrit to transform lives in the tehsils which reportedly have higher levels of people speaking Sanskrit. Here are some of the key findings. Table 1 shows the movement of L1–Sanskrit speakers between each census.

Table 1. 1971-2011 Census Results for L1–Sanskrit

Year	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
L1-Sanskrit	2,212	6,106	49,736	14,135	24,821
% change	176	715	-72	76	N/A

Table 2 provides data related to total numbers of ‘Sanskrit speakers’ between the 2001 and 2011 censuses. Self-reported L1 speakers increased from 14, 135 to 24, 821. The L2 figure has stayed almost the same, while the L3 figure has dropped by 48 percent.

Table 2. Sanskrit L1–L3 Matrix comparing 2001 and 2011 Census.

	L1	L2	L3
2001	14,135	1,234,931	3,742,223
2011	24,821	1,134,362	1,963,640

More men identify as Sanskrit speakers than women. 92 percent of people who speak Sanskrit as a second language (L2) have Hindi as their mother tongue (L1). The majority of people who speak L1–L3–Sanskrit also cluster around L1–L3–Hindi/English. Even though the total number of L1 has risen, the total L3 has almost halved. The total number of L1–L3 has decreased by 37 percent, even though the L1 has increased by 76 percent. The biggest growth is seen in the Female L1— 88 percent increase. The Male equivalent is a 67 percent increase. Female L2 increased by 17 percent and the Male decreased by 18 percent. In the L3 category, both Female and Male categories decreased by 30 percent and 54 percent, respectively.

Table 3. L1–L3 Sanskrit speakers: 2001 and 2011.

	2001			2011		
	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE
L1	14,135	8,189	5,946	24,821	13,636	11,185
L2	1,234,931	875,107	359,824	1,134,362	713,772	420,590
L3	3,742,223	2,751,121	991,102	1,963,640	1,266,098	697,542
L1–L3	4,991,289	3,634,417	1,356,872	3,122,823	1,993,506	1,129,317

95 percent of L2–Sanskrit speakers are L1–Hindi speakers—1,174,019/1,234,931. This places the L2–Sanskrit phenomenon within an exceptionally Hindi-centric context. This is only 0.3 percent of the total number of L1–Hindi speakers.

Uttar Pradesh experienced a 57 percent decrease. The total nationwide increase for L1–Sanskrit is 76 percent. Respectively, Maharashtra and Bihar increased 832 and 349 percent. The top 5 ‘Hindi heartland’ states represent 58 percent of the L1–Sanskrit total.

Table 4. State comparisons: 2001 and 2011.

TOTAL	2011		STATE	2001		TOTAL
	MALE	FEMALE		FEMALE	MALE	
3802	1984	1818	MAHARASHTRA	167	241	408
3388	1845	1543	BIHAR	341	413	754
3062	1697	1365	UTTAR PRADESH	3192	3856	7048
2375	1239	1136	RAHASTHAN	402	587	989
1871	988	883	MADHYA PRADESH	162	219	381
1218	698	520	KARNTAKA	354	476	830

The 2011 Top 3 tehsils for Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh are:

In Maharashtra, the total is 3801 (247 Rural/3554 Urban).

1. Pune Tehsil, Pune District 1091
2. Mumbai-Suburban, Thane District 536
3. Nashik Tehsil, Nashik District 396

In Madhya Pradesh, the total is 1818 (851 Rural/1020 Urban).

1. Pipariya Tehsil, Hoshangabad District 490
2. Huzur Tehsil, Bhopal District 249
3. Indore Tehsil, Indore District 201

In Uttar Pradesh, the total is 3,062 (743 Rural/1,668 Urban).

1. Kanpur Tehsil, Kanpur Nagar District 931
2. Mahmudabad Tehsil, Sitapur District 482
3. Lambhua Tehsil, Sultanpur District 310



Figure 1. Sitapur District within Uttar Pradesh.

The 2011 best performing districts in Uttar Pradesh are: Sitapur District (Figure 1) and Kanpur Nagar District. In Table 5, the 2001 and 2011 results are compared.

Table 5. Percentage increase / decrease and difference, 2001 and 2011.

Area Name	2001	2011	% +/-	Total %	
				2001	2011
Uttar Pradesh	7048	3062	-57		
Sitapur	4222	722	-83	43	24
Kanpur Nagar	14	932	6550	0.2	30

In 2011, Kanpur Nagar District returned 932. The 2001 results were 14. This is a 6,550 percent increase. Sitapur receded by 83 percent and Uttar Pradesh shrunk by 57 percent. When comparing the differences in percentage share of Uttar Pradesh's totals, Sitapur District decreased from 43 percent to 24 percent, while the Kanpur Nagar district increased from 0.2 percent to 30 percent. This is a 14,900 percent increase.

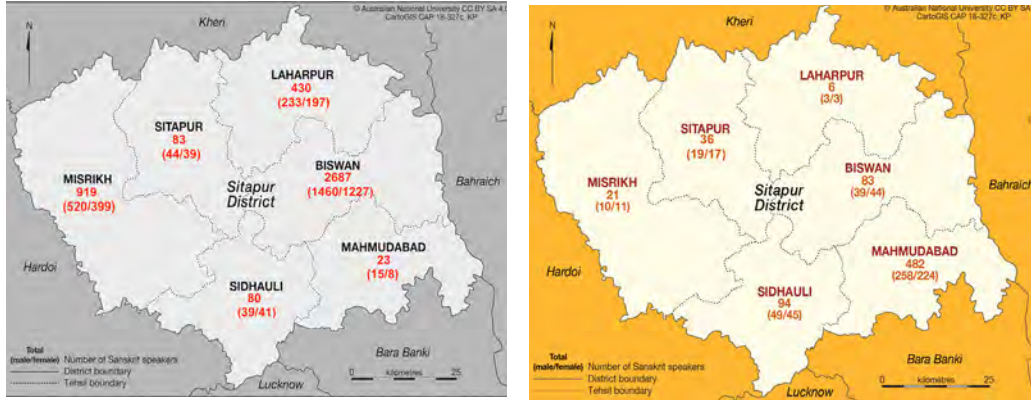


Figure 2. L1–Sanskrit, Sitapur District Tehsils, 2001 and 2011.

Table 6 shows the top-ranked tehsils from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. It indicates the overwhelming urbanity of people who identify as L1–Sanskrit speakers, as well as their location. It also indicates that correlated with an affinity for identifying as a speaker of Sanskrit are areas where people prefer to vote for the BJP or Shiv Sena, regardless of the size of the Hindu majority.

Table 6. 2011 Religious-Political affiliations and Literacy-Sex ratio comparisons.

No. of Speakers	State	District Name	Tehsil Name	Population	Literacy	Sex Ratio	Political	Hindu %
931	UP	Kanpur Nagar	Kanpur	3,470,334	73	860	BJP	83
839	MH	Pune	Pune City	3,274,923	90	948	BJP	79
556	MH	Mumbai –Suburban	Mumbai	8,640,419	90	860	BJP/ SHS	68
490	MP	Hoshangabad	Pipariya	181, 261	64	896	BJP	95
482	UP	Sitapur	Mahmudabad	596,252	47	884	Samajawada	74
396	MH	Nashik	Nashik	1,486,053	90	900	SHS	85
350	MH	Kalyan	Kalyan	1,247,327	91	920	SHS	81
249	MP	Bhopal	Huzur	2,107,523	72	920	BJP	72
201	MP	Indore	Indore	2,389,511	74	925	BJP	74
189	MH	Thane	Thane	2,111,413	89	888	SHS	74
181	MH	Nagpur	Nagpur Urban	2,405,665	91	963	BJP	69
171	MH	Pune	Haveli	1,727,692	89	833	BJP	84
61	MP	Rajgarh	Sarangpur	186,082	56	950	BJP	84

Some of the highest L1–Sanskrit tehsils in these three states return literacy and sex ratios well below national and state averages. This is regardless of whether the tehsil is Rural or Urban. If Sanskrit is really being spoken in these tehsils, then, according to the political theology underwriting this rhetoric, there should be a purifying and developmental effect occurring (McCartney, 2014). If we trust the data to be accurate, then there are many tehsils in India that are supposedly ensconced in India’s ‘core values’ (Press Trust India, 2018a). Yet, based on these development figures, what, then, does this tell us about the ability of Sanskrit to ‘transform lives’? Not only in a handful of tehsils in India, but, also, the possibility of it being used to achieve the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 goals, which, yoga and Sanskrit form integral components of in helping to increase development through tourism (SDG#12) (Press Trust India, 2018b), but, also, its role as an instrument of soft–power, and neoliberal coercion (McCartney, 2018).

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