

The Importance of Sanskrit to Hinduism

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The relationship between culture and language is an intimate one, for language is the vehicle of human thought. Language determines a culture's worldview. Vocabulary and syntax, with its subtle nuances and shades of meaning, determine how a culture interacts with the world. Language ultimately determines the shape of civilization.

Hinduism and Sanskrit are inseparably related. The roots of Hinduism can be traced to the dawn of Vedic civilization. From its inception, Vedic thought has been expressed through the medium of the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit, therefore, forms the basis of Hindu civilization.

As language changes, so religion changes. In the case of Hinduism, Sanskrit stood for three millennia as the carrier of Vedic thought before its dominance gradually gave way to the numerous *prākṛtas* or vernacular dialects that eventually evolved into the modern day languages of Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and so on. Although the foundations of Hinduism are built on the vocabulary and syntax of Sanskrit, these modern languages are now the primary carriers of Hindu thought within India. While the shift from Sanskrit to these regional languages forced a change in the meaning of words, and therefore a change in how subsequent generations interpreted the religion, the shift was at least within the context languages that were closely related to Sanskrit.

In the last century, however, a new phenomenon has been occurring. Hinduism has begun to emerge in the West in two significant forms. One is from Westerners who have come to embrace some variety of Hinduism through contact with a Hindu religious teacher. The other is through the immigration of Hindus who were born in India and who have now moved to the West. One of the first and most striking examples of the former scenario was Swami Vivekananda's appearance in Chicago at the Parliament of World Religions in 1896. At the time, Vivekananda received wide coverage in the American press and later in Europe as he traveled to England and other parts of Europe. Along the way he created many followers. Swami Vivekananda was the trailblazer for a whole series of Hindu teachers that have come to the West and who still continue to arrive today. The incursion of so many Hindu holy men has brought a new set of Hindu vocabulary and thought to the mind of popular Western culture.

The other important transplantation of Hinduism into the West has occurred with the increase in immigration to America and other Western countries of Hindus from India. In particular, during the 1970s America saw the influx of many Indian students who have subsequently settled in America and brought their families. These groups of immigrant Hindus are now actively engaged in creating Hindu temples and other institution in the West.

As Hinduism expands in the West, the emerging forms of this ancient tradition are naturally being reflected through the medium of Western languages, most prominent of which, is English. But as we have pointed out, the meanings of words are not easily moved from one language to the next. The more distant two languages are separated by geography, latitude and climate, etc. the more the meanings of words shift and ultimately the more the worldview shifts. While this is a natural thing, it does present the danger that the emerging Hindu religious culture in the West may drift too far a field. The differences between the Indian regional language and Sanskrit are minuscule when compared to the difference between a Western language such as English and Sanskrit.

With this problem in mind, the great difficulty in understanding Hinduism in the West, whether from the perspective of conversion or from a second generation of Hindus originally born in India, is that it is all too easy to approach Hinduism with foreign concepts of religion in mind. It is natural to unknowingly approach Hinduism with Christian, Jewish and Islamic notions of God, soul, heaven, hell and sin in mind. We translate *brahman* as God, *ātman* as soul, *pāpa* as sin, *dharma* as religion. But *brahman* is not the same as God; *ātman* is not equivalent to the soul, *pāpa* is not sin and *dharma* is much more than mere religion. To obtain a true understanding of sacred writings, such as the *Upaniṣads* or the *Bhagavad-gītā*, one must read them on their own terms and not from the perspective of another religious tradition. Because the Hinduism now developing in the West is being reflected through the lens of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the theological uniqueness of Hinduism is being compromised or completely lost.

Ideally, anyone attempting to understand Hinduism should have a working knowledge of Sanskrit. Ideally, all Hindu educational institutions and temples should teach Sanskrit, and all Hindu youth should learn Sanskrit. In reality this is not occurring, nor is it likely to occur. The critical mass that it takes to create a culture of Sanskrit learning is not here.

Even within the Hindu temples that are appearing in the West as a result of Hindu immigration, the demand for Sanskrit instruction is not there. And why should it be there? After all, these first generations of Hindu immigrants themselves do not know Sanskrit. Their Hinduism is through the regional languages. One may argue that Hinduism is still related closely enough to its Sanskritic roots through the regional languages. The problem with this argument is that even these regional languages are not being aggressively taught to the new generation. And if the history of other immigrant cultures to America is any gauge, the regional languages of India will die out after one or two generations in the great melting pot of America. This means that the Hindu youth of the second generation are gradually losing their regional ethnic roots and becoming increasingly westernized.

I do not suggest that this means the end of Hinduism. In fact I see positive signs when Hindu youth come to temples for *darśana* and prayer and increasingly ask for Hindu weddings and other *pūjās*. But it does suggest that the new Hinduism that is developing in the West will evolve in way that is divorced from its vernacular roots, what to speak of its Sanskritic roots, as Christianity in the West has developed separated from its original language base.

A solution to this problem of religious and cultural drift is to identify and create a glossary of Sanskrit religious words and then to bring them into common usage. Words such as *brahman*, *dharma*, *papa* should remain un-translated and become part of the common spoken language when we speak of Hindu matters. In this way, at least an essential vocabulary that contains the subtleties of Hinduism can remain intact. To a limited extent this is already occurring. Words such as *karma*, *yoga* and *dharma* are a part of common English speech, although not with their full religious meanings intact. Here is a list of terms along with a summary of their meanings that I suggest should be learned and remain un-translated by students of Hinduism. These are terms taken primarily from the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the ten major *Upaniṣads*.

brahman—derived from the Sanskrit root *br̥mh* meaning to grow, to expand, to bellow, to roar. The word *brahman* refers to the Supreme Principle regarded as impersonal and divested of all qualities. Brahman is the essence from which all created beings are produced and into which they are absorbed. This word is neuter and not to be confused with the masculine word *Brahmā*, the creator god. *Brahman* is sometimes used to denote the syllable Om or the Vedas in general.

karma—derived from the Sanskrit root *kr̥* meaning to do, to make. The work *karma* means action, work, and deed. Only secondarily does *karma* refer to the result of past deeds, which are more properly known as the *phalam* or fruit of action.

dharma—derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ* meaning to hold up, to carry, to bear, to sustain. The word *dharma* refers to that which upholds or sustains the universe. Human society, for example, is sustained and upheld by the *dharma* performed by its members. In other words, parents protecting and maintaining children, children being obedient to parents, the king protecting the citizens, are acts of *dharma* that uphold and sustain society. In this context *dharma* has the meaning of duty. Dharma also employs the meaning of law, religion, virtue, and ethics. These things uphold and sustain the proper functioning of human society. In philosophy *dharma* refers to the defining quality of an object. For instance, liquidity is one of the essential *dharmas* of water; coldness is a *dharma* of ice. In this case we can think that the existence of an object is sustained or defined by its essential attributes, *dharmas*.

adharma—the opposite of *dharma*. Mostly the term is used in the sense of unrighteousness, impiety or non-performance of duty.

guṇa—quality, positive attributes or virtues. In the context of *Bhagavad-gītā* and Sāṅkhya philosophy there are three *guṇas* of matter. Sometimes the *guṇa* is translated as phase or mode. Therefore the three *guṇas* or phases of matter are: *sattva-guṇa*, *rajo-guṇa* and *tamo-guṇa*. The word *guṇa* also means a rope or thread and it is sometimes said that beings are “roped” or “tied” into matter by the three *guṇas* of material nature.

sattva—the first of the three *guṇas* of matter. Sometimes translated as goodness, the phase of *sattva* is characterized by lightness, peace, cleanliness, knowledge, etc.

rajas—the second of the three *guṇas* of matter. Sometimes translated as passion, the phase of *rajas* is characterized by action, passion, creation, etc.

tamas—the third of the three *guṇas* of matter. Sometimes translated as darkness, the phase of *tamas* is characterized by darkness, ignorance, slowness, destruction, heaviness, disease, etc.

īśa—literally lord, master, or controller. *Īśa* one of the words used for God as the supreme controller. The word is also used to refer to any being or personality who is in control.

bhagavān—literally one possessed of *bhaga*. *Bhaga* means fame, glory, strength, power, etc. The word is used as an epithet applied to God, gods, or any holy or venerable personality.

pāpa—literally *pāpa* is what brings one down. Sometimes translated as sin or evil.

punya—the opposite to *pāpa*. *Punya* is what elevates; it is virtue or moral merit. *Pāpa* and *punya* generally go together as negative and positive “credits.” One reaps the reward of these negative or positive credits in life. The more *punya* one cultivates the higher one rises in life, whereas *pāpa* will cause one to find a lower position on life. *Punya* leads to happiness, *pāpa* leads to suffering.

yoga—derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, to join, to unite, to attach. The English word yoke is cognate with the Sanskrit word *yoga*. We can think of *yoga* as the joining of the *ātma* with the *paramātma*, the soul with God. There are numerous means of joining with God: through action, *karma-yoga*; through knowledge, *jñāna-yoga*; through devotion, *bhakti-yoga*; through meditation, *dhyāna-yoga*, etc. *Yoga* has many other meaning. For example, in astronomy and astrology it refers to a conjunction (union) of planets.

yogī—literally one possessed of yoga. A *yogī* is a practitioner of yoga.

jñāna—derived from the Sanskrit root *jñā*, to know, to learn, to experience. In the context of *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Upaniṣads*, *jñāna* is generally used in the sense of spiritual knowledge or awareness.

vi-jñāna—derived from the prefix *vi* added to the noun *jñāna*. The prefix *vi* added to a noun tends to diminish or invert the meaning of a word. If *jñāna* is spiritual knowledge, *vi-jñāna* is practical or profane knowledge. Sometimes *vi-jñāna* and *jñāna* are used together in the sense of knowledge and wisdom.

kāma—wish, desire, love. Often used in the sense of sexual desire or love, but not necessarily so. *Kāma* is one of the four *puruṣārthas* or “goals of life,” the others being *dharma*, *artha* and *mokṣa*.

mokṣa—liberation or freedom of rebirth. Mokṣa is one of the four *puruṣārthas* or “goals of life,” the others being *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*.

artha—wealth, not to be understood solely as material assets, but all kinds of wealth including non-tangibles such as knowledge, friendship and love. *Artha* is one of the four *puruṣārthas* or “goals of life” the others being *dharma*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*.

nirvāṇa—blown out or extinguished as in the case of a lamp. *Nirvāṇa* is generally used to refer to a material life that has been extinguished, i.e. for one who has achieved freedom from re-birth. The term *nirvāṇa* is commonly used in Buddhism as the final stage a practitioner strives for. The word does not mean heaven.

sāṅkhya—calculating, enumeration, analysis, categorization. Modern science can be said to be a form of *sāṅkhya* because it attempts to analyze and categorize matter into its constituent elements. *Sāṅkhya* also refers to an ancient system of philosophy attributed to the sage Kapila. This philosophy is so called because it enumerates or analyses reality into a set number of basic elements, similar to modern science.

brāhmaṇa—a member of the traditional priestly class. The *brāhmaṇa* was the first of the four *varṇas* in the social system called *varṇāśrama-dharma*. Literally the word means “in relation to *brahman*.” A *brāhmaṇa* is one who follows the way of *brahman*. Traditionally a *brāhmaṇa*, often written as brahmin, filled the role of priest, teacher and thinker.

kṣatriya—a member of the traditional military or warrior class. The *kṣatriya* was the second *varṇa* in the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

vaiśya—a member of the traditional mercantile or business community. The *vaiśya* was the third *varṇa* in the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

śūdra—a member of the traditional working class. The *śūdra* was the fourth *varṇa* in the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

varṇāśrama—the traditional social system of four *varṇas* and four *āśramas*. The word *varṇa* literally means, “color” and it refers to four basic natures of mankind: *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*. The *āśramas* are the four stages of an individual’s life: *brahmacarya* (student), *gṛhastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (retired) and *sannyāsa* (renounced).

satyam—truth. The word *satyam* is formed from *sat* with the added abstract suffix. *Sat* refers to what is true and real. The abstract suffix *yam* means “ness.” Thus *satyam* literally means trueness or realness.

puruṣa—man, male. In *sāṅkhya* philosophy *puruṣa* denotes the Supreme Male Principle in the universe. Its counterpart is *prakṛti*.

prakṛti—material nature. In *Sāṅkhya* philosophy *prakṛti* is comprised of eight elements: earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect and ego. It is characterized by the three *guṇas*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. *Prakṛti* is female. *Puruṣa* is male.

deva—derived from the Sanskrit root *div* meaning to shine or become bright. A *deva* is therefore a “shining one.” The word is used to refer to God, a god or any exalted personality. The female version is *devī*.

puruṣottama—comprised of two words: *puruṣa* + *uttama* literally meaning “highest man.” *Puruṣottama* means God.