

# Life in a Dead Language

## *Modern Sanskrit as an Ultraminor Literature*

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### Abstract

Literature written in Sanskrit after the onset of British colonialism is sorely neglected. Modern Sanskrit, as it is often called, suffers from the bad image of being written in a dead language. Many of its writers would disagree with that image, but they would know that they are disagreeing. That defensiveness has come to shape their writing, a fact which I argue arises in response to the status of their work as an ultraminor literature, a status which was born with the formation of the “world literature” field and its elevation/absorption of classical Sanskrit at the expense of the latter’s perceived potential for contemporaneity.

### Keywords

Modern Sanskrit – ultraminor literature – nostalgia – dead language – South Asian literature – World Literature

### Introduction

The literature of Modern Sanskrit has the curious distinction of being written under the sign of its own death—not the impending death of many minor languages, but the *fait accompli* of both imperial and postcolonial decree. Colonizers located Sanskrit in the distant past in order to foster a narrative of decline in which they play the role of redeemer, or—lest they seem too optimistic—salvager. Postcolonial scholars turn a skeptical eye toward Hindu nationalism’s nostalgic (read: necrophiliac) love for Sanskrit as an icon of lost integrity, ready to be restored. Nobody including the nationalists to which the postcolonialists respond, engages too deeply with the afterlives of the language.

Nonetheless, poems continue to be written by the thousands, books published, national awards handed out—all in the name of a language so many agree is dead.<sup>1</sup> This article suggests that the whole phenomenon deserves much more thoughtful attention.

It is not easy to talk about Modern Sanskrit literature. Its legibility within the horizons of world literary studies is far from guaranteed. It is not a “major” literature that has simply been overlooked. Too few people read or even know about it for that, and those who do lack the economic and cultural backing to ensure its practical grasp on the world, that what is said in Modern Sanskrit is said consequentially (contrast what is said *about* Sanskrit, an idea which circulates at the heart of much Indian political conversation, as we shall see toward the end of this article). It is also not straightforwardly minor in that it is so obviously allied with an elite, with certain claims to (Hindu, Indian) majority. What’s more, some voices express uncertainty that it even qualifies viably as literature. Thus Modern Sanskrit writing threatens to fall below the minor even as it can also seem to stand too haughtily above it.

In this essay, I want to track how Modern Sanskrit’s arrival on the world stage (and the world stage’s arrival in Sanskrit) inevitably pushes it out of the familiar major/minor spotlights that contemporary literary study favors for illuminating its objects. I call the position Modern Sanskrit ends up occupying “ultra-minor.” To anticipate the arguments to follow, I suggest that what is at stake is more than the (very real) fact that Modern Sanskrit inevitably falls between the disciplinary cracks when, on the one hand, it fails to appeal to the largely philological and historical interests of traditional Indology (the usual readers of Sanskrit), and on the other, it lends itself to neither the “writing-back” nor the subaltern-studies approaches often favored by postcolonial critics (the usual academic readers of contemporary Indian literature). Instead, following Aamir Mufti, I suggest that the entire Orientalism-derived project of “world literature” is brought to bear in the production of Sanskrit as a dead language. In order to understand what is happening when Modern Sanskrit literature responds to that status—plays with it in its own literary undoing—we must therefore trace the complex history of how Sanskrit came to be thought dead. In so doing, we

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1 One observer counts “[a]round one hundred periodical[s] ... being published at present” (Tripathi “Introduction” 18). Unfortunately, the diffuse nature of their publication “has made it almost impossible to keep track of all the new books ... that are released in hundreds of every month” (18–19). One bibliography, however, has “5040 entries (3360 in the main list and 1680 in the appendix)” (19). And the Sahitya Akademi, India’s National Academy of Letters, annually awards prizes to works in each of its designated languages, including Sanskrit. See also “Sanskrit Periodicals.”

will discover that to intentionally write in a dead language in a mood of nostalgia for that language can be a potentially subversive act—much more, in other words, than the simply repetitive conservatism it might seem.

### The Imaginative Pinning of Sanskrit

The story of how colonial discourse gave Sanskrit its death sentence comes in two parts: first, Sanskrit was pinned down, and then its life was called into question. As it turned out, questioning was all it took—the pinning had already knocked what life it might have had out of it. As I hope to show, however, there remains even then, at story's end, an entity otherwise than living, otherwise than dead, carrying on in inscrutable (to Orientalist eyes) anachronism. I call that entity Modern Sanskrit. In order to approach it, though, we must flesh out the above narrative with a bit more detail.

First, the pinning down. As is well known by now, “The vast social world that was India had to be classified, categorized, and bounded before it could be ordered” by the British (Cohn 21–2). One major strategy for carrying out that project involved positing “India” as such as an organizing category for scholarly investigation. “India,” though, was not simply a contemporary geographic object, it was a “civilization.” Attempts to make sense of that civilization led, as various scholars have shown, to a search for textual roots in “its” earliest Sanskrit writings.<sup>2</sup> Prevailing opinion at the time held that “the present condition of a society or civilization [could] be understood only as the outcome of its past,” and nowhere better than at the “master moment” when the civilization was born (Dharwadker 175). But there were also less loftily academic motivations for utilizing the textual-civilizational methodology. First, there were political factors that encouraged Hindu- (and hence Sanskrit-) centrism in delimiting the civilization at hand. Second, there was a great deal of confusion over the messiness of the present, messiness which was readily escaped by turning to the past. The interplay of these motivations led scholars in the end to pin down a reasonably coherent field of Sanskrit literature and culture, which was taken to be uniquely expressive of the Hindu-Indian civilizational essence.

To give some texture to these observations (and to point to some evidence for them), let us consider the now-notorious case of the colonial construction of “Hindu law.”<sup>3</sup> In 1772, Governor Warren Hastings issued a new Judicial Plan

2 See, e.g. Cohn; Dharwadker; Dodson; Mufti; and Rocher.

3 The history recounted here is elaborated in more detail by, e.g. Cohn, Dodson, and Rocher, on whom the following account draws. I choose the perspective of administration and the law because it is in that domain that Sanskrit manifestly continues as a vital medium of

in Bengal. That plan, which provided that the peoples of India should be subject to their “own” laws, was largely responsible for establishing British interest in Sanskrit. In practice, the plan meant two bodies of law, one for Muslims and one for everyone else, understood as Hindus. The dichotomy was quite inapt, but it allowed the British to “cast themselves as the protectors of a vast and suppliant majority that had been held under the thumb of Muslim oppressors” in the wake of Mughal rule (Rocher 222). Immediately, however, problems arose. Not least was the question as to what “Hindu law” was. Hastings’ idea was that there was an “ancient constitution” that had been passed down “unchanged from remotest antiquity,” held in trust by Sanskrit-speaking Brahmin scholars, i.e. “pandits” (cited in Cohn 66).<sup>4</sup> They, however, confounded expectations by seeming, to suspicious British eyes, variously incompetent, dishonest, and inconsistent. Goaded by such frustrations, one prominent judge at the Supreme Court, William Jones, decided to learn Sanskrit himself to “check on” their work (cited in Cohn 28).

It hardly needs saying, therefore, that British scholars of the late eighteenth century, like Jones, did not come to Sanskrit wanting to become pandits. They came wanting rather to produce state-of-the-art *British* scholarship about what they believed the pandits to know. What pandits knew, however, was not necessarily what the colonial imagination wished it to be. If the British plan was to cut out the supposed middle men and read the laws themselves, the plan had flaws. To begin, the laws were complex and nowhere so succinctly stated as the phrase “ancient constitution” might suggest. The British required rigorous local instruction if they were to understand the texts. But, from what we can tell now, Bengal at the time was no hotbed of legal studies; the best Sanskrit minds were occupied with logic. Pandits did try to work with the British, though, which led to a “renaissance of *dharmaśāstra*,” the branch of Sanskrit learning that colonial officials and their pandit interlocutors decided corresponded most closely to the English field of “law” (Rocher 237). The correspondence worked better in theory than practice, however. As was soon apparent, what a Bengali pandit did with *dharmaśāstra* very inadequately matched what a British judge did with his law books (hence Jones’ initial frustration). The British believed, “in western fashion, that for a single problem there was only one single solution that could be right” (237). Such conviction required further entrenching claims

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production *within* colonial culture even as it is relegated imaginatively to the past. Hence the erasure of linguistic “life” is clearest. The basic narrative holds true in the other domains of culture—Rosane Rocher notes, e.g. the “strikingly similar assumptions” that underpin efforts to understand Hinduism despite the lack of explicit administrative motivation (225).

4 For an introduction to the pandit as a cultural phenomenon, see Michaels.

to the existence of a single legal code—India’s “ancient constitution”—rather than confronting the messy reality, that labyrinth of commentarial traditions used by the pandits. The entire field of Sanskrit legal studies, therefore, had to be carefully constructed, albeit under the guise of deciphering and “re”-constructing lost origins.

Similar reconstructions went on in other domains, including religion, aesthetics, and—most crucially for us—literature. Each shared the basic presuppositions of the legal case, namely the whole civilizational logic of what Aamir Mufti has called the “Sanskrit-centered Indic complex” (Mufti 116). In each domain, a particular text gained preeminence through translation and Indological study: the *Law of Manu* for legal studies, the *Bhagavad Gita* for Hindu religion, or Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* for classical Sanskrit literature. Each text had, of course, been valued by the tradition; but only at this point does Sanskrit become, in the literary sphere, “the language of Kalidasa.” For that matter, only here does *the* Indian tradition come into being.<sup>5</sup>

Already we can see two dimensions of what I am calling the “pinning down” of Sanskrit tradition. First, scholars posit a traditional unity. Second, that unity is located in the past—a past which, in practice, exists only textually. We might speak, in a figurative mood, of Sanskrit being given a center of gravity that pulls attention toward its well-specified location in the past, toward, e.g. the flourishing of Kalidasa at the Gupta court in the fifth century CE. But what is the attention drawn away *from*? Besides the obvious vernaculars, more recent Sanskrit writing also recedes from view. Note that texts produced in the intervening years between, say, the sought-after constitutional urtext and the present are, in this Indological framework, made both redundant (as only an elaboration of that first impetus) and quite likely decadent. In short, they become pointless to study.<sup>6</sup> As Rosane Rocher notes, the denigration of the later tradition was likely exacerbated by the tradition’s own tendency to present itself as “derivative and commentarial” (229).

5 Sheldon Pollock rightly notes that there were parallel forms of “hierarchizing textualization” in precolonial South Asia (“Deep Orientalism?” 100). Where the colonial version differed, however, from its precolonial parentage (to which it directly appealed and of which it availed itself in its own project) is in linking the textuality to a given culture. Previously the texts provided truth *simpliciter*, not the truth *of the Hindus*, say, or *of India*. That is, we are now dealing with the foundations of a “national” culture.

6 A striking symptom of this mentality: only recently have scholars begun seriously to map out “Sanskrit knowledge systems on the eve of colonialism,” (Pollock “Introduction”). That means, of course, that for most of the history of Indology, the most obvious gap in its understanding of Sanskrit culture lay precisely where Indology actually met its object of study.

Consequently, the pandits “ceased to be considered the living guardians and interpreters of the indigenous tradition and were downgraded to assistants to, and employees of, the British” (Rocher 239). But this is only true of the “tradition” as newly constituted by the British. Other, more minor (in the sense of small, local) lineages continued along more or less customary lines. Michael Dodson stresses that even colonially employed pandits often continued to teach according to “traditional” methods at their homes. Colonial needs, moreover, were various. In order to undermine former channels of patronage (and hence the authority of former patrons), the administration also offered purely customary patronage to Sanskrit culture otherwise unaffiliated with administrative projects (Dodson 49). So, as a medium of communication, of instruction, indeed of textual production, Sanskrit the *language* continued popping up all over the place even as Sanskrit the *culture* came to be pinned in an image of stagnation. Even the colonial administration continued to use the living half of the language. Warren Hastings collected petitions “to be filed against his impeachment” (Raghavan, *Modern Sanskrit Writings* 3). And, most obviously, the court continued to hire pandits to write judicial opinions (in Sanskrit). Nevertheless, the axiology of Indology could only dismiss such uses of the language as inexpressive of anything “Sanskritic” or even Indian, as they are clearly products of the colonial relationship. What is a classical Indologist to do with any of the many Sanskrit odes to British monarchs?

Thus Sanskrit was pinned down as a cultural field and as an object of historical knowledge. Colonial projects to standardize subsequent education ensured that this fixed image of Indologized Sanskrit was given back to the language for self-replication. Because the government wished its pandits to write legal opinions uniformly, according to the British notion of India’s ancient constitution, schools were established to teach and perpetuate the British-mediated Sanskrit tradition. Henceforth Sanskrit literature comes increasingly to mean, metonymically, Kalidasa, not the work, say, of a nineteenth-century Nepali pandit.<sup>7</sup> It is thanks to that legacy that an otherwise marvelous book called “The Modernity of Sanskrit” can refer not to any modern texts in Sanskrit, only to the role played by classical texts in modernity (Sawhney).

### Vitality Questioned

Now that we have a working grasp on the first half of Sanskrit’s colonial death sentence, we can turn to the second half, which comes not in the textual but

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<sup>7</sup> See Schneider.

in the social domain. Leaving the manuscripts behind, what did colonial-era thinkers make of Sanskrit's relative placement as one language among others? Initially, there was much confusion on the point. Many held that Sanskrit was artificial, invented by "insidious Bruhmans [sic]" to keep their secrets (Cohn 25, 37). William Jones disagreed, but thought it no older than "pure Hindi," which he considered the truly "primeval" language of northern India, Sanskrit having arrived through the supposed Aryan invasion (Dodson 127). Another observer noted that the pandits themselves "assert that [Sanskrit] ... was never used as a common medium of communication among men," favoring instead a divine interpretation of the language (cited in Dodson 125). Each alternative had its own conceptual consequences, but the question was largely an academic one when pursued among Sanskritists.

In a variety of venues, however, the socio-historical placement of a language came to matter a great deal. That is because the British operated on what Robert Young calls a "nominalist monolingual model" of language (1209). Under that model, languages are discrete and nameable (hence the nominalism) and each speaker has a unique relationship with only one language, her so-called "mother tongue" (hence the monolingualism). Unfortunately, the model fundamentally failed to capture precolonial South Asia's linguistic complexity. As Lisa Mitchell notes,

At the very beginning of the nineteenth century someone in southern India might find it perfectly natural to compose an official letter in Persian, record a land transaction in Marathi, send a personal note to a relative in Telugu, perform religious ablutions in Sanskrit, and barter with the vegetable vendor in Tamil, all in the course of a single day.

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And, Mitchell goes on to argue, none of those languages would have been the source of feelings of communal identity. Nevertheless, the nominalist monolingual model prevailed. Likely fueled by the rise of utilitarianism in nineteenth-century imperialist discourse as it clashed with the classicism of Sanskrit-centered Indology, the model came to a special prominence in political decision-making, leading to claims about language and community taking center stage in competition for resources and authority.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of Sanskrit, this all means that it was immediately declared dead. Not just in the publications of the British, as it had been before, but by Indi-

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8 For an account of the rise of utilitarianism and its impact on Orientalism, see Majeed.

ans themselves. Sheldon Pollock tells of the first known example, from 1857, the year of the “Mutiny” that marked both the decisive arrival of the British state apparatus and the first great image of indigenous resistance to it (“Death” 394). The Indian in question, a Gujarati poet by the name of Dalpatram, invokes the idea that Sanskrit had been dead already for a millennium (!) in an elegy in remembrance of Alexander Kinloch Forbes. Aside from being Dalpatram’s friend, Forbes was a colonial administrator who founded the Gujarat Vernacular Society in order to encourage Gujaratis to “develop” their supposed mother tongue (Isaka 7). It is no coincidence that the arrival of Sanskrit’s funeral coincides with the consolidation of a British-sponsored turn to the vernacular, nor that the poet declaring the death should become the acknowledged founder of “modern” Gujarati literature.<sup>9</sup> As we are coming to see, modernity in South Asian languages comes at the cost of Sanskrit’s vitality (as perceived from “outside”—i.e. as seen from the mediating “neutrality” of English<sup>10</sup>—not as practiced internally).

Sanskrit’s death knell then echoed across the subcontinent. In South India, people used it to leverage the value of the still-living Tamil, India’s other “classical” language (Ramaswamy 44). In colonial Bengal, Ram Mohan Roy stepped into the Anglicism-Orientalism debate, deploying strategically rhetoric both sides could agree on: the Indological stereotype of Sanskrit education as “what was known two thousand years ago, with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since produced by speculative men” (43)—never mind that this was not a characterization that he quite believed on its own terms; it spoke to his audience and served his ends, i.e. getting his countrymen access to the language and knowledge of the then-current power (Robertson). Nor were vernacular proponents in North India any more sympathetic to Sanskrit’s claims to vitality, as new vernacular legitimacy lay precisely on monolingualist grounds. As one twentieth-century Hindi critic put it, “Even if English had not arrived to interrupt and break our tradition, we would still be forced to abandon Sanskrit today, because it is no longer the language of the common person” (Dvivedi, cited in Sawhney “Who” 299).<sup>11</sup> Leaving aside the question whether any standardized language in India at the time belonged to the “common man,” notice the assumption that “we” can only have *one* language, and so must turn to the vernacular. Gone is the possibility of Sanskrit maintaining a separate literary sphere of practice.

9 See also Kathori.

10 On “English as vanishing mediator,” see Mufti (16).

11 I am not saying that these political claims are illegitimate, only noting that their cumulative effect is to reinforce the notion of contemporary Sanskrit anachronism.



The decisive moment in adopting the monolingual model comes when speakers rethink their relationship to language. That is one of the key insights of an important book by Lisa Mitchell on South India's embrace of mother-tongue monolingualism. Whereas previously people in South Asia—and, for that matter, pre-eighteenth century Europe (Yildiz)—approached languages as “tools for particular tasks,” now languages took on personal meaning, as attributes of identity (Mitchell 10). Accordingly, people had to take care of “their” language, keep it alive, and make it whole and healthy. Otherwise, they, as a community, would cease to exist (89–90). Sanskrit, however, had no such community identity, except perhaps on caste grounds—grounds which, needless to say, quickly lost their own legitimacy (with good reason).

It would be a step too far, however, to say that Sanskrit was uniformly disavowed. It was widely esteemed, albeit in the form of the “heritage” whose production we saw in the last section, by the emerging bourgeois classes who became in time the leaders of anti-colonial nationalism, as well as by ideologues of linguistic purity.<sup>12</sup> The latter gave Sanskrit a modicum of continued productive vitality, placing it rhetorically at the head of languages like Hindi, as their great legitimator and lexical storehouse. Sanskrit thus lived on, but only as the teleological endpoint of a “Sanskritized” Hindi or Bengali, a register that is popularly held abstruse, out of touch, and parochial—hardly the associations a living language would wish to have.

The problem with these many circulating deaths is that Sanskrit never really “lived” to “die.” It just didn't fit the monolingual model's biologism. Indologists have long realized this.<sup>13</sup> As Sheldon Pollock notes, one could say that Sanskrit was “born dead” (“Death” 393). Increasing uneasiness with pat biologism has given way lately to a profusion of colorful, if not particularly helpful, metaphors. Sanskrit has been called, at one point or another, a “ghost” (Vajpeyi “Return” 46), a “vampire” (Sawhney “Who” 298), and a “zombie” (Knutson 120). It has even been likened to H.P. Lovecraft's Chthulhu (Knutson 16). Such extravagant metaphors, while not unfounded, ultimately manage to hold onto Sanskrit as freak exception, instead of using it to problematize the language model that so manifestly fails to do its object justice. Let us, then, emphasize the artificiality of Sanskrit's not simply dying, but becoming, of a sudden, a long-dead ancestor.

12 For examinations of the relationship between Hindi, nationalism, Sanskrit, and Hinduism, see Dalmia (on the nineteenth century); Orsini (on the early twentieth); and Rai.

13 Rapson had already made the point by 1904.

It would be equally artificial to insist, defensively, anachronistically, that Sanskrit was always living and continues to be so today—in short, that Sanskrit simply prompts us to clarify what we mean by language life. The relationship between Sanskrit and its environs has shifted frequently over the course of its history. Sanskrit *itself* is plural. One scholar's partial list of its forms includes: “*Vaidika*, ... ‘Classical’ Sanskrit with [its] many styles ... Pāṇini’s ‘*Bhāṣā*’, Epic Sanskrit, Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, Ārṣa Sanskrit (the language of the *ṛṣis*), *Aiśa* Sanskrit (the language of *Īśa* or God), Buddhist Tantric Sanskrit ... colloquial Sanskrit, *Ardhasaṃskṛta*, ‘Quasi-Sanskrit’, etc.” (Vasudeva 186). Each lived in a different way, if lived is the word one insists upon. One of the more interesting questions in a literary history of Sanskrit is precisely what kind of life a given period found in the language, i.e. what distinctive uses Sanskrit’s writers felt it to have at that time. That varies from the “language-intrinsic evocativeness” of the multilingual dramas of Kalidasa (Vasudeva 204) to the increasing “depth” of reference brought to the table as cosmopolitan and local intermingle in the vernacular millennium (Bronner and Shulman 2).

### A Literature Left Behind: Sanskrit Becomes Modern

Working in the German context, Yasemin Yildiz has noted that the late-eighteenth century shift to the monolingual paradigm “relegated linguistic practices without proper names to the status of deviation, hodgepodge, or simply invisibility, rather than recognizing them as ‘language’” (7). Sanskrit may have had a proper name at the onset of monolingual thinking in South Asia, but that did not prevent aspects of it from being similarly occluded from view. As we have seen in the last two sections, ways of talking about Sanskrit shifted under colonialism so as to make new writing invisible outside the narrow confines of its immediate circulation. To recap: Sanskrit’s death sentence operated on two levels. First, as Indology definitively arrived on the Indian scene, its institutional and methodological investments split Sanskrit into an “essential” body of texts, on the one hand, and an insignificant but diverse set of continued language practices, on the other. Later popular, scholarly, and political discourse rendered even the latter practices apparently anachronistic, superfluous to what was going on more “naturally” in the “mother tongues.”

Readers familiar with Aamir Mufti’s recent *Forget English!* may recognize in the above story a shifted perspective on what Mufti calls the “institution of ‘Indian literature,’ that is, the single event of its emergence and insertion into the space of world literature” (38). That, too, is a two-part process, involving “the Sanskritization of tradition, on the one hand, and the invention of the modern

vernaculars, on the other” (116–17). Mufti’s account, though, focuses on the successful, emergent end of the story—the body of writing newly reconstituted as India’s contribution to world literature. His goal is to denaturalize, exposing the new world literature’s genealogical roots in the Orientalist project. I am interested instead in what got left behind. Modern Sanskrit, I contend, is such a remainder. But what exactly remained?

Unfortunately, as Jürgen Hanneder notes, “This [i.e. colonial] phase in the production of Sanskrit works remains until today one of the blank spots in Indology” (299).<sup>14</sup> At the level of crude generalization, though, we can follow V. Raghavan in observing that Sanskrit’s modernity began with a bifurcation. Some pandits continued along the traditional path, while others interacted more interestedly with the colonial government and its new institutions (“Sanskrit Writings”). They—the latter collaborators—gave birth to a complex series of renegotiations, borrowings, and innovations that can only be accounted for under a new historical heading: call it “modern.” Thus began a slow and uneven slide from writing which was “merely” left behind by the worldly gaze to the literature constituted *in* being left behind.

Allow me to clarify. If Sanskrit’s entry onto the world stage via projects like Jones’ translations of Kalidasa came at the cost of specifically *Modern Sanskrit’s* ability also to stand on that stage, it does not mean that Modern Sanskrit writers simply ignored the ongoing pageantry. As time went on, new literature in Sanskrit began increasingly to register symptomatically its newfound status as imperiled (and eventually dead) inheritor of the tradition *as seen by* the world at large. Symptoms therefore register both aspects of the “death sentence” outlined earlier. First, we find the language absorbing a self-image inflected by Indological discourse. Thus the European infatuation with Kalidasa, and his *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* in particular, returns to Modern Sanskrit as a matter of its very definition. Modern Sanskrit becomes “the language of Kalidasa,” and, as if to prove the point, an unprecedented flurry of texts appeared explicitly engaging the poet’s legacy. Satya Vrat Shastri has provided scholars a boon in this regard, offering some of Modern Sanskrit literatures’ finer criticism in two volumes: one on sixteen literary works recounting Kalidasa’s life story and another on forty works *otherwise* related to his poetry. Works considered span the twentieth century, and even then the list is non-exhaustive.

14 There have been a number of historical sketches from inside the tradition. Most are largely bibliographic in nature, peppered with casual evaluation. Seminal such accounts can be found in Raghavan’s article “Sanskrit,” as well as his book-length *Modern Sanskrit Writings*.

The second way that Modern Sanskrit took on the burden of its new status comes in an immense self-consciousness about language choice. Now appears a new genre of meta-poetry, which takes the Sanskrit language itself as its subject. “Sanskrit” appears personified in “her” own works. She might be the object of an apostrophizing eulogy, or she might confront her linguistic competitors dramatically. Radhavallabh Tripathi recounts an example of the latter: A.R. Rajaraja Varma’s turn-of-the-century<sup>15</sup> *Gairvāṇīvijaya* (“Victory of the Language of the Gods,” i.e. Sanskrit). It depicts the lady Sanskrit, “[t]hwarted by the overpowering impact of English and Anglicization,” as she “approaches [the god] Brahmā and makes an appeal to save her from oppression.” Various Indian languages, along with English, are brought to plead their cases, and Brahmā settles the disputes, telling everyone present “to live peacefully and make room for each other’s growth” (Tripathi “Introduction” 4). Not yet has Sanskrit’s death become an inevitable feature of the language, but the seeds are sown. Later authors will find themselves needing to imagine a new birth for their language entirely (see, e.g. Kaṇṭakārjuna).

It is here that the ultraminority of Modern Sanskrit literature comes to the fore, just as it begins to register its own death alongside the conditions that gave rise to it. Because the gap between the new literature and its respected forebears is not natural, but colonially determined, we cannot casually invoke the idea of a “post-major” literature. Moreover, the term minor literature, however conceived, suggests either too competitive or too subversive a relationship with the major to capture the case at hand. Perhaps the most decisive reason, though, for denying Modern Sanskrit the title simply of “minor” is this: precisely to the extent that Modern Sanskrit literature tries to compete with its vernacular peers on their terms, it falls further into the trap of its own ultraminority, since Sanskrit lacks their claims to currency.

Modern Sanskrit produces a specifically ultraminor literature, one in competition not with a major canon but with the entire system that divides the world into distinct major and minor literatures. In short, Modern Sanskrit’s literary ultraminority lies in its need to overcome, subvert, or at least reconfigure the Orientalist logic that produced both “world literature” at large and Modern Sanskrit’s insignificance for it. Such a project, if it is to succeed, requires acknowledging what Yasemin Yildiz calls the “postmonolingual condition.” That condition cannot simply be brushed aside with facile appeals to multilingualism, but

15 Unfortunately, Tripathi does not give a date and I have been unable to find a copy of the text myself. Varma, however, lived from 1863 to 1918, and his other available works show him to have been active throughout his adult life.

must be carefully and patiently “work[ed] through” (13). Not all, but some Modern Sanskrit literature does gesture toward such work. Surprisingly, perhaps, it is among the most nostalgic.

### Radhavallabh Tripathi and the Nostalgia of Modern Sanskrit

Consider Radhavallabh Tripathi. A retired professor from Madhya Pradesh in North Central India, he has published many dozens of books in Sanskrit, Hindi, and English, and served as the Vice Chancellor of the Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, a “deemed university” established by the Government of India for the preservation and development of Sanskrit learning. He is also (and thus) one of the most systematic and active proponents of the Sanskrit language today.

In public statements, Tripathi claims to have always found Sanskrit obviously and unproblematically alive,<sup>16</sup> but when he turns to actually write poetry, he goes on to produce verses like this:

Distorted in this monstrous din,  
words crafted by wise men of old vanish.  
I search the dark for words among words,  
look for the primordial with new lamps.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, it is not such an obvious task to write in Sanskrit today after all. This is what I want to call the language of postcolonial nostalgia. That may sound like a weaker claim than I intend, for I do not mean (solely) that Tripathi is being nostalgic. Sanskrit is often enough accused of that (more on which in the next section). No, I mean that the language Tripathi writes in is intrinsically nostalgic, that it is the language in which nostalgia most naturally “finds” expression. Or so at least Tripathi seems to act in the work I want to discuss.

That work—a poem, published, like the earlier verse, in a 1986 volume called *Laharīdaśakam* (*Ten Waves*)—provides a kind of culminating fusion of the

16 In remarks published by a leading Indian newspaper, *The Hindu*, Tripathi discusses his lifelong relationship to the vitality of Sanskrit. His stance on the question of death is pithily stated, “No language should be called a dead language ... languages do not die. The human beings who could have enlivened themselves through them—they die” (quoted by Rajan, ellipses original).

17 kolālahale 'tra vikāṭe vikālāḥ praṇaṣṭāḥ / śabdāḥ purāṇamanīṣijanaiḥ susṛṣṭāḥ // śabdeṣu śabdān militān kilādyān / anveṣayāmi timire navadīpikābhiḥ (127–8). All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

two symptomatic strands of Modern Sanskrit literature specified earlier. In doing so, it allows us to see in some detail how Tripathi engages with Modern Sanskrit *as* a dead language, i.e. as one that lives in another time. My proposal will be that such engagement can be understood to constitute an attempt, whether successful or not, to work with and through the postcolonial (and so postmonolingual) condition that produces the ultraminority of Modern Sanskrit literature. But to get there, we must work through the poem, for which a bit of background is needed.

Although published initially in a Sanskrit-only edition, *Ten Waves* was reissued in 2003 with a Hindi translation and commentary, which will provide key moments in my argument as I attempt to locate the metapoetic aspects of the poem, namely, its implicit claims to Sanskrit-specificity. (Naturally, then, my claims will focus on places where the Hindi “loses” the Sanskrit). As for the poem in question, it is the first of the book’s ten constitutive “waves”—specifically, the “Wave on Spring.” More simply, we can call it “Spring.” “Spring” follows the poet-speaker as he searches for the titular season, one of the most beloved settings for classical Sanskrit poetry. As the Hindi commentary introducing the poem puts it, “Departing from the portrayal of spring in traditional poetry, the poet underscores how difficult the incarnation (*avataraṇ*) of spring has become amid the pollution and destruction of the environment” (1). That may, however, state the matter too baldly, for the “portrayal of spring in traditional poetry” is by no means banished entirely. Rather, it reappears as the condition for making sense of the newness of “modern” spring.

On a linguistic level, here is an especially suggestive verse:

Copper cords of lightning carry  
featherless fliers  
hanging by their feet,  
betraying nature’s perversion.<sup>18</sup>

My English cannot hope to capture the sense in the original that the world’s “perversion” is revealed by—or perhaps even created in—the articulation of the image into Sanskrit. For, aside from the last line about perversion, the Sanskrit can *also* be read relatively straightforwardly as a description of bats hanging from a telephone wire. Where the strangeness comes in is in searching for words for the scene. *Electricity* is hardly a classical Sanskrit word; nor really

18 sambhena vidyuta ihātatalauhatantāv / uttānapādavanamya śiraḥ svakīyam // vyālabate sa khalu carmacaro vihaṅgo / vyatyāsam eva sṛṣṭigataṃ vivṛṇvan (10).

is *wire*. So “cords of lightning” it is. The intelligibility of the verse relies on the fact that modern North Indian languages such as Hindi use the same word for lightning and electricity quite unselfconsciously (words that are themselves derived from the Sanskrit used here: *vidyut*). Unlike those languages, however, Sanskrit has not lost the strangeness of the meaning transfer.

We are dealing with a striking variant of a well-worn figure of speech from classical Sanskrit: “*śleṣa*,” an elaborate and much more poetically serious form of what we in English would call a pun. Yigal Bronner has recently made available the quite impressive history of this figure in his book, *Extreme Poetry*. In it, Bronner makes a striking speculation. *Śleṣa*, he notes, underwent a peculiar boom in medieval South India precisely as the vernaculars were beginning to make their presence felt literarily. He speculates that this boom signals an anxious fumbling for purpose among Sanskrit writers. What did Sanskrit have to offer *uniquely* now that it had vernacular competitors? The answer, Bronner suggests, lay in *śleṣa*, which allowed punning so elaborate that a poet could tell two stories simultaneously, depending on how the poem was parsed.

Might there be a parallel attempt to find the specificity of Sanskrit in Tripathi’s verse? Although Tripathi is almost certainly not consciously invoking that history—he seems symptomatically uninterested in post-classical poetry—it is nonetheless striking that the figure should prove vital at precisely this *new* moment of anxiety. Still, something has changed in Tripathi’s use of *śleṣa*. Whereas the puns Bronner discusses often appeal to intertextuality, referencing other genres and narratives—and hence remain in the semiotic realm—Tripathi’s pun on electricity and lightning is decidedly referential. Throughout his poem, the nagging question is not what do these words mean, but what do these words refer to: *Is spring “real” and is this “not-spring” that I see all around me “really” a perversion of it?*

Thus Tripathi’s Sanskrit is ambivalent and uncertain about the world, uncertain even about itself. This is far less true of the Hindi translation, where the “perversion” is suppressed.<sup>19</sup> Hindi *bijlī* much more familiarly means electricity than does *vidyut* to a classical Sanskrit ear. Additionally, the translation deploys a common word for *bat* where the Sanskrit prefers to combine a prevalent noun for bird, *vihaṃga* (literally, *sky-goer*), with an uncommon<sup>20</sup> modifier, *carma-cara* (literally, *moving by skin*), in order, presumably, to heighten the estranging effect of the description. Add to that the infrequency with which bats appear in

19 khambhe par bijli ke khiṃce hue tār par pair ūpar aur sir nīce kar ke laṭkā huā camgādar mānoṃ sṣṭi meṃ ho gaye ulaṭpher ko batātā huā laṭak rahā hai (10).

20 The word is unattested, for example, in the canonical Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary.

the erotic imagery of classical Sanskrit poetry about spring (a genre unto itself) and the clash of conditions between the modern and the classical stands out much clearer in Sanskrit.

In terms of “Spring” as a whole, that clash is not as simple as it may seem in our isolated verse. The poem very much maintains a tension throughout, but it plays with our conceptual mapping of that tension. In other words, readers confront a second-order ambiguity about the exact nature of the object to which the poet thinks he is comparing the current season. Upon finishing the poem, the gift of hindsight allows us to say that, over the course of the work, the poet’s conception of what a season *is* slowly and dramatically shifts, leading eventually to a crucial realization. At first, he seems to imagine that the external season can and should be understood as literally instantiating (or failing to instantiate) the poetic imagery associated with it by tradition, thereby affirming a nationalist-Orientalist discourse of glorious origins. By the end, however, he has done something better described as internalizing the mood “spring” as a *relation* to the world rather than a factual state of the environment.<sup>21</sup>

The text’s opening already evinces an uneasy juxtaposition of internality and externality.

As words approach memory, dissolve,  
sink into some corner of the mind;  
as sprouts of poetry burst forth,  
and die suddenly, in the mind of a poet—so there is spring.<sup>22</sup>

This verse raises the question of the relationship between poetic failure and the season’s failed arrival. One possibility, offered by the accompanying Hindi commentary, is that there is something about modernity that makes both poetic creation and environmental rejuvenation equally difficult. Degraded times have rendered success ever more difficult. But this is not the only interpretation. The verse itself conspicuously lacks temporal markers. Even the present “is” that I supply in translation is elided from the Sanskrit, which simply reads, “so spring” (such verbs often being tacit in Sanskrit). Moreover, the following verse complicates the relationship further,

21 There is some imprecision in referring to a subject-world relation as “internal,” but it usefully suggests an important shift away from the rigorously external focus of the beginning.

22 śabdā yathā smṛtim upetya punar vilinā / śīdanti citta-jagati kvacid eka-koṇe // udbhidyate ‘tha ca vināśam upaiti sadyaḥ / kāvyāṅkuraḥ kavi-maṇaḥsu tathā vasantāḥ (1).



Those two early months, Madhu and Mādhava, are said  
to spread forth the sumptuous glory of spring,  
Madhu yields no honey now,  
and Mādhava passes likewise, empty-seeming.<sup>23</sup>

It not only puns on the names of these months,<sup>24</sup> which derive from the word for honey (*madhu*), but also draws our attention to the ways in which the poet's search for spring is conditioned by what is "said" in the tradition and what the language itself suggests etymologically. Also striking is the poet's choice of the word *iha* as the particle to contrast reality from what was "said." I translate *iha* as *now*, following both the Hindi translation and the general thematics of the poem, but the word ordinarily denotes spatial placement: *here, at this place*. Such ambiguity is crucial. Although the translation and commentary continually posit a temporal break between *now* and *then*, the poem itself cleverly eludes such easy distinctions. While we must understand the poem to "mean" *now* at this point in the narrative, the ambiguity suggestively anticipates the breakdown of a naïve conception of cultural memory as holding access to pasts untouched by present concerns and interests. Thus we can read the verse as also dividing, not then and now, but the fossilized meanings of a "dead language" and the lived experience of the poet-speaker.

The text eventually relinquishes attachment to classical tropes for a new attitude that creates "spring" out of words, but addressing that turn would take us too far afield from present concerns. Instead, I return us to the question of the poem's relation to world literature; which is to say, to its status as an example of ultraminor literature. By treating his language as, in a surprisingly productive sense, "dead," Tripathi simultaneously engages the discursive world-literature heritage that would marginalize his efforts and rebukes that heritage by refusing translatability. As Mitchell and Young agree, modern translation requires a belief in language parallelism that disrupts precolonial modes of language practice. But Tripathi's Sanskrit precisely rebuts that belief by availing itself of the historically contingent, language-specific fact of Sanskrit's supposed death. The poem's resistance to translation is not a matter of some romanticized cultural "genius" inherent in Sanskrit. Nor does it rely on the identity claim that

23 uktāv ubhau ca madhu-mādhava-mukhya-māsau /vāsantikīm śriyam aho tanutaḥ suram-yām // māsō madhuḥ sa iha naiva madhu vyanakti /vyatyeti śūnya iva mādhava-māsa evam (2).

24 Madhu is a relatively common name for the first spring month, most often called Caitra. Vaiśākha is the usual name for the second, but, as Tripathi's commentary points out, there is Vedic precedent for calling the two months of spring "Madhu and Mādhava."

Sanskrit belongs more naturally or authentically to Tripathi than do other languages. The poem appeals instead to literature as a localized language practice, resistant to world literature as such.

### Modern Sanskrit and the Political Horizon of Hindu Nationalism

Readers may have noticed a striking omission in my discussion so far. It might seem that no consideration of Modern Sanskrit can escape the contemporary political context of Hindu Nationalism. And, indeed, it cannot. I have, however, forestalled that discussion in order to stress that this literature is not reducible to that political movement. However interconnected their histories may be, they are separate histories, and Modern Sanskrit is no mere symptom of Hindutva ideology.<sup>25</sup> Tripathi's poem, as we have seen, requires no strident claim for lost greatness recovered, and too hasty a jump to political context risks erasing the specificity of the texts at hand. Indeed, I argue that it risks reinforcing the claims of Hindu Nationalism by playing into the discourse on which it relies and whose history and consequences I have outlined above. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that to mention Modern Sanskrit is to evoke for many the specter of Hindu nationalism. While Modern Sanskrit texts continue to languish outside the worldly gaze, *claims* to the vitality and modernity of Sanskrit have, for that gaze, taken center-stage. And those claims complicate our picture of Modern Sanskrit's literary ultraminority.

Sheldon Pollock begins his controversial diagnosis of Sanskrit's long death by underscoring the need for autopsy: "Few things are as central to [Hindu nationalist] revisionism as Sanskrit" ("Death" 392). Rectifying that revisionism is a concern shared by many of Sanskrit's secular sympathizers (Vajpeyi, Sawhney, myself). And the rhetorical stakes have only risen since Pollock's 2001 article, now that the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has risen undeniably to power. As a recent polemic by Ananya Vajpeyi says, "Today Sanskrit has come out of the ivory tower and descended onto the cultural battlefield. It's time that scholars and academics did the same" ("Return" 50). And so we arrive at *The Battle for Sanskrit*, both the book by right-wing Hindu activist Rajiv Malhotra and the conflict it names. Rather than rehearse the familiar

25 Hindutva, literally "Hindu-ness," is a term popularized by anti-colonial activist and politician Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and eventually taken up by the current ruling party of India as their official ideology, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or the "Indian People's Party."

left-right battle lines, however, let us first note that neither side makes serious reference to any Modern Sanskrit texts. And then, having so noted, let us ask why.

One reason is that both sides share an investment in Sanskrit's death. "Sanskrit" for both overwhelmingly means ancient texts. And both operate fundamentally within the monolingual-nationalist discourses discussed above. When it comes to Pollock, Vajpeyi, and other secular Sanskritists, that may not be surprising. But Malhotra and company assert the absolute vitality of Sanskrit, so my assertion may seem misplaced in their case. It is not. Christophe Jaffrelot has argued at considerable length that the essential pattern of Hindu Nationalism's historical development is a repeated double movement of "stigmatising" and "emulating" its constitutive others—principally, the British and Muslims (*Movement*). That phenomenon is on ready display in the case of Sanskrit, where, as Jaffrelot notes, Orientalist valorization of Sanskrit's antiquity led to its Hindu Nationalist reclamation as the "mother of all languages" (*Reader* 218). More commonly, though, Sanskrit is invoked in this vein as a "national language" because mother to all languages of the nation (116, 225). Such identitarian logic is to be expected from an aggressive nationalist movement, but as followers of Modern Sanskrit's death, we should note that it was the making of such identity that cost the language its life in the first place. When Modern Sanskrit is most interesting is when it forsakes such identity for a search for new niche practices that articulate past and present in new and unexpected ways.

Lest I end on too optimistic a note, I want to stress that I am not claiming the existence of a substantial contingent of radical Sanskrit critics of Hindu Nationalism. My claims for the literature are modest on that front. Its writers, at their best, work with the messiness of the present. They are forced to acknowledge that forging continuity with tradition is hard, and hard for specific reasons that change what can be written. They have to work through the ultraminority, not toss it aside to assert its majority. Sometimes they succeed.

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