

Immortality is My Name

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I am your root, *vija*, your past glory and present embarrassment. I defined and united your world and your time. I myself am beyond time. I convey who you are, something you yourself have forgotten. I am your marker to history, but not only that. I am also a living testimony to your shared origins, your inheritance of this earth. I am Sanskrit, refined and perfect.

I am the repository of all scientific and philosophical truths your ancestors had discovered through their insight and bequeathed to you. The word for truth is *rita*, cognate with Greek *arête*, from which the English word 'truth' derives. The connection runs much deeper than mere similarity in the pronunciation of these words. I share many roots with many other languages. Our common and shared origins are rooted in the distant and dim past at the cradle of humankind where we had all dwelt together. We carry our linguistic genes from the days of our early evolution even though we may not have any memory of that. I ushered in a different meaning unto the world, like the Greeks, through *yukti*, which actually means 'junction'. It is cognate with Latin verb *iugare* – 'to join' - which gave the derivatives: joint, junction and yoga. Like all languages, I joined the minds of people.

I am the DNA that transmits the code of the living through words since the ancient dawn of civilisation. I am your genetic code. The world is affected by the words you use, they surround you, condition you, define you and constitute your choice. You cannot disentangle your language from your roots. When the character of people changes, their language also changes. It is an immutable law. As wave after waves of invasion unsettled life in medieval India, I too had to change. When people lost their vitality and physical strength, I degenerated. When they were not courageous enough to embrace other cultures and religions and sought relief and complacency in obscurantism, I became a symbol of all your escape and defeat, your withdrawal into casteism and lifeless rituals, the mandalisation of your politics and the politicisation of your *dharma*, which derives from my root *dhri* meaning 'to hold'. As you failed to hold together, things fell apart and disorder and chaos reigned supreme. A language carries the signature of the soul of its speakers; it represents their way of dealing with life. A nation that loses its language loses its soul and its history. Language moulds the organic unity of a culture. Rediscovering a language is rediscovering your lost soul.

I carry within myself the ritualistic hymns of your *Vedas* and the philosophical richness of your *Upanishads*. I not only united ancient India that did not have a political boundary, but I gave it a cultural boundary which was much more potent than any political boundary. In the fourth century BC, my fluidity was frozen by Panini in his *Astadhyaya*, and the rigid rules of phonology and morphology framed through his 4000 aphorisms gave me a structure almost like mathematics. No wonder the first concepts of zero and infinity was expressed through me. Even the later unorthodox transformations of *Prakrits* and *Pali* could not alter my dynamic structure which absorbed and assimilated all currents of contemporary thoughts. It also gave me the strength to survive the silence of the next few centuries, allowing me the space to transform myself seamlessly into other Indian languages you speak today.

I united Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva from the south of India with Kalidasa, Rajasekhara and Bhavabhuti from the north. By the 8th century AD, with the expansion of Indian commerce, I had

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spread outside, and found new niches in Central Asia, Tibet, Indo-China, Indonesia and China— binding India with the rest of Asia. Yes, I was the language of ridiculous *Brahmanical* rituals, but I was also the language of the elites in royal courts and of higher education. Through two millennia, I provided linguistic and cultural unity to India and moulded life according to the *Dharma-Sastra* texts and that outrageous code of conduct called *Manu Samhita*. I did propagate *Varnashrama* as a social hierarchy and discipline, but even in my wildest dreams could not imagine what the Brahmins would make of it. Today, of course, it is the political Brahmins of your country who are making the most of it for their own gains. You made me synonymous with liturgy. You identified and equated me with the Sanskrit teachers at your schools who are universal objects of derision and ridicule, and with everything that is archaic, anti-modern and irrelevant. It amuses me to see that today you are campaigning for my revival and rehabilitation.

You have branded me as the carrier of obscurantist ideas and meaningless rituals. You have forgotten that my efflorescence from the 4th to 7th century AD saw not only a flourishing of secular literature of the *kavyas* and *natakas* of Kalidasa, Dandin, Magha and Bharavi, but a great surge in scientific ideas too: in geometry, algebra, astronomy, medicine, chemistry and architecture that reached the highest levels of excellence. Today when you are losing the distinction between science and mythology and cannot tell evidence-based reasoning from the mindless acceptance of authority or speculation, may I remind you that at a time when European scholars were invoking God to explain the world, I gave you the infinite series and theorems that today form the basis of Calculus? Through *Sankhya* philosophy, I taught people to believe in *yukti* (logic) and not in the sacred scriptures, propagated *Nirisvaravada* (atheism) saying that there was no *pramana* (proof) for the existence of *Isvara* (God) and rejected creationism by saying that nature experiences evolution due solely to its internal dynamics. Unlike now, then there was a great deal more inquiry and openness in society.

I have no memory of where and how I came into being - whether from the nomads roaming the plains of Central Asia or from the pastoralists in the steppes north of the Black Sea, or from myths. I only know that I flourished here in all my grandeur some 5000 years ago as one of the Indo-European groups of languages that are today spoken by half the world. Today though most proclaim me dead, from my lack of adaptability to the scientific-technological civilisation ushered in by the British. Phew!

Dead I am not, nor shall I ever be. Through the shared origins of languages and of all life, I transcend death. I am deathless. I am born again and again. The word 'cognate' means 'born together', from Latin *gnatus* meaning 'to be born'. It is akin to the Sanskrit root *jan* from where the word *janma*, 'to come into existence', derives. *Jan* is also cognate with Latin *genus* meaning 'origin', from which the words genetic, generate, generation and even genocide are derived. I have survived through scores of indifferent generations and many genocides. I am timeless. Time in *kaala*, from *kal*, meaning 'to count' which is cognate to Latin *calcularre*, from which derive the words 'calculate' and 'calendar'. *Kaala* is also death, but my death will come only at the end of time, or when there will be none left to measure time. I have survived the silence of umpteen centuries and shall continue to live in the heart and soul of the country whose thoughts, culture and life I had shaped.

I symbolise *vidya* meaning knowledge which is derived from *vid*, meaning 'to perceive, observe', akin to *Veda* which is cognate with Latin *videre*, 'to see'. The words video, vista, vision, divide and dividend are derived from this. I have the wisdom to 'see' with my *manas* or 'mind'. It is again cognate with Latin *mentis* - 'to think' - which gave the word *mental*. My world was mental, I showed the way to

unity, while you only divided the country into narrow domestic walls of castes and sub-castes, religious vote-banks, social elites and caste-pariahs. I symbolised and perfected an almost mathematical language of which complexity and diversity are but natural offshoots. Like the combinatorial operations of digital circuits, I also devised an iterative procedure to yield an infinite array of hierarchically structured expressions. Is it my fault if society copied my hierarchy within hierarchies and produced an unbelievably complex, elaborately interwoven and a ruthlessly unjust class structure?

I embodied and symbolized a spirit of inquiry which, alas, no longer exists here. No wonder, people do not study me anymore in the country of my birth, where openness and analysis are discouraged. No wonder, the serious minded ones now migrate to the universities of Oxford, Chicago and Heidelberg to study me. No wonder today in India, you don't find scholars like Surendranath, Hiriyantha or Radhakrishnan who had flourished even during the oppressive colonial rule. It is not really about the difficulty of making a living with a language others perceive dead. It is actually about the ability to think, argue and analyse. It is about excellence, openness and inquiry I always personified: *Vichara paramam gnanam* - inquiry is the highest wisdom. Today, you only champion mediocrity.

Death is *mrityu*, from *mri*, 'to die'. It is cognate with Latin *mori*, from which the words 'mortality' and 'mortgage' derive. I do not mortgage my soul to petty minded politicians who want to profess their love for me by negating everything I had stood for. Their patronage is the last thing I want: "*Yachna mogha varamadhigune nadhame labdhakama!*"- *Better far is that my entreaties should fail with the great than prevail with the unworthy.*