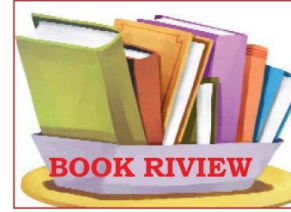


# Why The Battle for Sanskrit matters

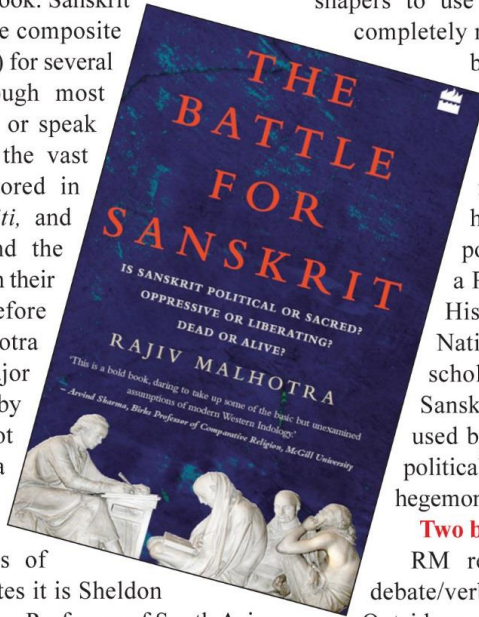


by Shrinivas Tilak

In chapter one of *The Battle for Sanskrit* the author Rajiv Malhotra succinctly explains his purpose (*prayojana*) in writing this book: Sanskrit has been the heartbeat of the composite Indian civilization (Sanskriti) for several thousand years. Even though most Indians do not read, write, or speak Sanskrit, they draw upon the vast reservoir of knowledge stored in Sanskrit texts—*Shruti*, *Smriti*, and *Itihasa* (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) for guidance in their daily lives. One would therefore think, muses Rajiv Malhotra (hereafter RM) that a major takeover of Sanskrit studies by Western scholars would not go unnoticed in India particularly when their works discount or undermine the core values of Sanskriti. In the United States it is Sheldon Pollock (Arvind Raghunathan Professor of South Asian Studies at Columbia University, New York) who leads and shapes the project of keeping the custody of Sanskrit and Sanskriti studies in the Western hands.

The purpose of writing *The Battle for Sanskrit* (hereafter TBFS) is to expose, criticize, counter, and contest such studies and interpretations of Sanskrit and Sanskriti by politically active Sanskritists and scholars who occupy powerful academic positions in a number of fields in Indology from where they (1) control the editing and authoring of many influential works in and on Sanskrit and Sanskriti and (2) initiate or support petitions that attack Hindu institutions and leaders that encourage study of Sanskrit by all and invite active participation in Sanskriti. They also lobby in Indian political circles, exerting influence through the media.

Chapter two of TBFS provides a detailed account of Sheldon Pollock's activism (hereafter Pollock). A leading Sanskrit scholar, Pollock is regarded as a hero by many fellow academics and leftists in the USA and in India. He has trained and inspired an army of young American and Indian scholars, popular writers, and other opinion-



shapers to use his interpretations of Sanskrit for a completely new analysis of Indian society. The new breed of intellectual leaders groomed under his aegis includes a number of young scholars from across the world that pretend to claim and parade their newly earned 'authority' on Sanskrit history, social structures, and their political implications. Patrick McCartney, a PhD candidate in the School of Culture, History and Language at the Australian National University, is one such aspiring scholar inspired by Pollock's assessment of Sanskrit—though dead, Sanskrit is still being used by the Hindu right for its own moral and political agenda and to implement it as part of its hegemonic aims\*

## Two battling camps

RM refers to the two antagonists in the debate/verbal battle over Sanskrit and Sanskriti as Outsiders and Insiders (TBFS pp. 30-34). It was linguist Kenneth L. Pike who coined the terminology of 'etic' and 'emic' to refer to the views held by an 'Outsider' and 'Insider' on a given issue. While etic refers to a detached, trained observer's perception of the uninterpreted 'raw' data; emic refers to how those data are interpreted by an 'Insider' to the system. An emic unit is a physical or mental item or system treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behavior in terms of the context. The 'Outsider' allegedly brings with him/her a detached observer's view, which is one window on the world. The view of the local scene through the eyes of a native participant is a different window. Either view by itself is restricted in scope and may lead to distortion.

Thus, in the etic perspective, the color 'white' is perceived as equal presence of light of all wave-lengths by an average human eye. In the emic perspective, on the other hand, it denotes the notion of purity and auspiciousness (as in India) or mourning (as in China). RM argues that while the 'Outsider' looks at Sanskrit essentially from an Orientalist and Social/ anthropological studies point of view; the 'Insider' camp primarily holds a





traditional Indic view of Sanskrit and tries to understand Sanskrit the way the insiders see it.

Two important caveats may be entered here: (1) RM is categorical in stating that the 'Outsider' vs 'Insider' division is not set in stone nor is it based on race, ethnicity, or nationality. Thus, while in general the Western view looks at Sanskrit and Sanskriti with an Orientalist lens, any Westerner holding the traditional viewpoint on Sanskrit would be called an 'Insider.' By the same token Indians holding an exclusively Social/anthropological science point of view while denying the traditional view would come under the 'Outsider' camp; (2) though the 'battle metaphor' figures extensively; RM's battle for Sanskrit is not physical but verbal and metaphysical.

#### ***Purvapaksha, Uttara paksha, and Siddhanta***

RM's overall argument as developed in TBFS is structured in a three tiered format of the traditional debate: Purvapaksha--faithful depiction and presentation of the views (*mata*) held prima facie by one's opponent concerning key ideas about a major precept or practice in philosophy, jurisprudence, or medicine (*pariksha*), Uttara paksha -critical assessment and subsequent refutation of the point of view of the opponent on the subject under scrutiny (*nirnaya* = decision) and Siddhanta -putting forth of a 'provisional' conclusion that is subject to revision after subsequent round/s of debate. The bulk of TBFS is given to presentation (*Purvapaksha*) and refutation (*Uttara paksha*) of four key propositions put forth by Pollock:

**I** Decoupling Sanskrit from the Vedas by removing the mystic aura surrounding it. Scholars then must direct their gaze through the window of Sanskrit into the history of India to expose the toxic role Sanskrit has had in social oppression as claimed by select historians,

**II** Secularizing the Sanskrit kavya tradition by peeling away its *paramartha* (transcendental) dimension,

**III** Interpreting the Ramayana as a social and political weapon of oppression against women, shudras, and Muslims as claimed by some select historians,

**IV** Declaring the death of Sanskrit. The cause of its death was the structures of abuse that were built into it and Hindu kings accelerated that



***Rajiv Malhotra***

process. Pollock absolves Muslim invaders and British colonizers from any hand in the death of Sanskrit.

Though not as elaborate as his *Purvapaksha*, RM's *Uttara paksha* nevertheless undertakes a careful diagnosis certifying that Sanskrit is not dead. Rather, Hindus continue to celebrate it as a living language for its enduring sacredness, aesthetic powers, metaphysical acuity, and ability to generate and support knowledge in many domains (TBFS p. 30). *Siddhanta* expresses the hope that Hindus of today will set

up training academies to form 'home teams' of insider scholars to assure that Sanskrit regains and retains its power as a living language that sustains Sanskriti (with input from Prakrit languages; TBFS p. 372)\*\*

#### **Central message of TBFS**

Dialogue (whether performed in public or written down) is an essential feature of Sanskriti that has always been multi-vocal and multi-lingual. Hindu doctrines, practices, and institutions are not controlled by one voice of authority (though Pollock et al want us to believe that all authority was vested in Brahmins). Hindu texts, doctrines, histories, rituals, ceremonies, architecture and art are products of a pluralistic culture and society. A harmonious sharing of a common cultural space and labor between Sanskrit and regional languages (from Bengali to Tamil) existed in the past. Available epigraphic evidence, for instance, suggests that while the genealogical account in many inscriptions is in Sanskrit, the 'business' portion (f. i. details of a land grant) are in a regional language. Today, Sanskrit could be used similarly to interpret, supplement, and re-describe the constitutional and legal reality while in the pragmatic day-to-day affairs regional languages would prevail.

RM next successfully drives home the point that Pollock (and others who follow him) must realize that



***Sheldon Pollock***

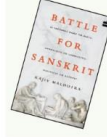
dealing with Sanskrit and Sanskriti (which together exert their ongoing and 'lived presence' upon hundreds of millions of Hindus) is different from dealing with the classics of a community which no longer has living practitioners of the religion/s or culture of that community. Living presence of those who read, understand, and use material stored in Sanskrit as well as actively participate in Sanskriti is both a challenge and an opportunity to Pollock et al.

Challenge because these users/ practitioners can react/ respond to what Pollock has written or said about what they hold dear and practice (as TBFS does); opportunity because a scholar of Pollock's caliber can call on living users/ practitioners to test the validity of his claim: Sanskrit is dead, politically and socially oppressive, and freedom denying.

#### Concluding remarks

Since Outsiders and Insiders hold widely different views on Sanskrit and Sanskriti, each can profit from a dialogue with the other. A typical picture comprises perspectives that appear different in isolation. Taken together, however, the resulting 'stereographic' perspective can be novel and productive. RM believes that a dialogue carried out in a 'stereographic' manner would not only uncover commonalities as may exist but may also creatively develop them bringing the two camps closer in a spirit of mutual respect. An inclusive framework might then emerge that will draw upon the synergy existing between emic and etic approaches that would respect the sensibilities of Hindus who continue to live by Sanskrit and Sanskriti. Hindus on their part need to sustain and support RM in this endeavor by actively participating in debates and dialogues with the opposing camp on one or more of the eighteen topics listed in TBFS (pp. 375-378). ■

**\*\* (Editor's note-DrTilak's article discussing RM's refutation of Pollock's four key propositions in more detail will be published in a later issue of Hindu Vishwa).**



**The Battle For Sanskrit: Is Sanskrit Dead or Alive? Oppressive or Liberating? political or sacred?**  
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