



Propagation of Caste Prejudices Through Languages

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ABSTRACT: Language is a dynamic system that is continuously altered by the community that uses it and covertly influences the belief systems of the culture where it is commonly used. As such a language would contain within it the essence of the culture of its origins and its social prejudices. This paper looks at how certain languages spoken in India continue to propagate ideas and norms of the past with special emphasis on the part played in propagating one of the main cultural prejudices of Indian society 'Casteism'. It also scrutinizes various cultural relics that could have seeped into language and how its continued use promotes a caste distinction in the present society.

Keywords: Caste, Subjugation, Language, Malayalam, Violence

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the continuing debates regarding violence and language is whether language hinders violence or if it has a role in promoting it. Due to a common language instead of exerting direct violence there is a chance to debate, to exchange words and such an exchange, even when aggressive, has to involve a minimum level recognition of the other. On the other hand language 'subjectivizes'. In pogroms the mass hatred of a particular community towards another is induced through the idea of the other. For instance the anti Semitic sentiments during Hitler's regime were largely propagated through a false idea of the Jew. What the perpetrators reacted to was not the immediate reality but to the image thus propagated¹. From the simplified forms such as abuses to the more complex one of propagating a negative/false image, and thus provoking mass hatred, language has a role in violent events. Slavoj Žižek rightly asks the question "What if human beings exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they can speak?"[1]

II. CASTEISM THROUGH LANGUAGE

Language contained class markers throughout history. The language of the conqueror was imposed on the conquered in ancient times. The Norman invasion of 1066 gave French a higher position over English. It was seen as the language of the peasants and was regarded as a sign of the speaker's social inferiority. [2] Another such instance is the prominent position enjoyed by Sanskrit among Indian languages. Vedic Sanskrit was the language of the upper class. Other languages were classified together as Prakrit and were spoken by the lower classes. [3] Prakritam even in present day Malayalam means undeveloped or crude. The knowledge of Sanskrit was the prerogative of the upper castes. As most of the texts were of this language the denial of the language meant a denial of the collective wisdom of generations. This position of Sanskrit was so strictly enforced in Kerala that a person of the lower caste who even accidentally happened to overhear a lesson in

¹ "The Jews are the incarnation of evil, the demons of decay and chaos...Jews threaten every nation. We do not care what others do, but Germany will not bow before this threat." These are the words spoken by the Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels over the radio in 1943 and was widely broadcasted in Germany. [4] The propagandas often depicted the Jews as a collective identity wiping away any individuality which could have created a sense of identity.

Sanskrit was brutally punished² Malayalam being a language influenced by both Sanskrit and Tamil has vocabulary from both the languages. The view of Sanskrit as a language of the upper class has seeped into vocabulary and culture. Sanskrit words are considered more elite and literary. Table 1 has a list of words that have two or more equivalent words in Malayalam one with Sanskrit and the other with Tamil origin. The words given under the Tamil origin is what would be seen as a lower or colloquial form and the ones with Sanskrit origin are the standardized or elite equivalents. A European equivalent of this linguistic hierarchy would be the French -English difference where French words are considered as fashionable or learned (e.g.: Chauffer—driver, chef—cook, etc.)

Table 1 Words meaning the same but with different origins (Tamil or Sanskrit) used in present day Malayalam

Word in English	Malayalam word with Tamil origin	Malayalam word with Sanskrit origin
Pond	Kolam	Thadaakam
Food	Saappadu	Bhakshanam
Name	Paeru	Naamam
Sister	akkan	Sahodari
Birthday	piranaal	Janmadinam

The centuries of dominance of the majority by the Sanskrit speaking upper class has left this indelible mark in the present day language. Whatever is Sanskrit or linked to it is still upper class in language. Another way in which Sanskrit was used as weapon was through the naming system. The lower caste especially the untouchables had no right to use the names with Sanskrit origins. They had to use an altered or distorted version of that (see Table 2).

Table 2 List of Sanskrit names and their distorted versions that were used by Dalits

Sanskrit Name	Distorted name
Soman	Koman
Lekshmi	Lechmi/ Yechmi
Krishnan	Kitchnan/ Kichen
Govindan	Kovindan
Gopalan	Kovalan
Neelakandan	Neelaandan

This is not just restricted to Hinduism either. Sarah Joseph, a prominent author and social activist of Kerala, points out in her novel *Othappu*³, instances where a converted Christian is allowed to take only a distorted form of the original Christian name. Language was used as a power tool and a weapon for suppression. The feeling of inferiority was inflicted on a child right from birth where he had to content himself with names that were distortions of the original. An imperfection implying something that belonged to the lower caste should be low standard too.⁴ Casteism which is a multi layered form of Class domination has had its own influence in vocabulary, usages and phrases. Language and its usages influence how we look at things and our perceptions and views are unconsciously reflected through language. The Casteism prevalent in Kerala is often invisible to an outside observer and it is all the more dangerous precisely because of this. But looking closely at the language used one can see how it is nothing but absent. The terms for abuses (profanities) are the best examples. ‘Chetta’⁵ means a scoundrel in modern day Malayalam. It originally referred to the huts of Pulayans⁶. ‘Polayaadi mone’ is another derogatory term which literally translates to the son of a ‘Pulayan’. But it has come

² “Death was the sentence to an untouchable who wanted education. The Laws of Manu, followed by orthodox Hindus, prescribed the method of execution. If an untouchable even overheard Sanskrit, the language of scriptures, he was to be killed by having molten lead poured into his ears”. [5]

³ *Othappu* is a Malayalam novel published in 2005. The novel is the last in a trilogy which includes 'Alaahayude Penmakal' and 'Mattathi'. *Othappu* is set in the Kerala Christian community and tells the story of a nun who decides to step outside the convent and embrace a life free from the shackles of established religious norms and practices. [6]

⁴ Often members belonging to the ‘lower’ castes were given names that suggested inferiority such as Pullan (from the Malayalam word ‘pullu’ which means grass). Chaathan is another such name. The word chaathan means a devil in Malayalam.

⁵ There are two sounds that could be represented using the English letters ‘ta’. For the word ‘chetta’ to mean a scoundrel (or a Pulayan’s house) the ending ‘ta’ has to be a voiceless alveolar plosive. If the ending ‘tta’ is a retroflex, then the word would mean an elder brother.

⁶ Pulayans also known as Cherumans are considered as a ‘lower caste’ and as a rule, toilers attached to the soil. [7]

to mean the son of an infidel. Another instance is the caste named Pandaram⁷ where the caste name itself has become an abuse. 'Pandaram' is used to denote someone who is deadweight or an annoyance. 'Korathi' is a term used mostly in Thiruvananthapuram dialect to mean a girl who is unkempt and dirty. The term originally denoted a girl belonging to the 'Koravar⁸' caste. It's just not restricted to words either. There are several commonly used phrases which are casteist.

As opposed to 'Korathi' the phrase 'illathile kutti polundallo' would mean the girl looks really beautiful and accomplished like a girl from an 'illam' which is the term for a traditional Brahmin⁹ house. 'Njan ente poreodam pulayanu vilkum' is a threat to the neighbour. The sentence literally means I'll sell off my land to a Pulayan. The threat is intended to mean even if it destroys me I'll ruin you. Selling land off to a Pulayan is considered shameful. But if their neighbouring lands are sold off to a Pulayan the neighbour would have no choice but to move out of the area. 'Brahmanante vaakku' which means a Brahmin's promise is a phrase that signifies that the promise of the person can be trusted because he is a Brahmin.

The usage of caste terms as abuses is not just restricted to Kerala either. Instances can be found in several languages including Hindi, Telugu, Odiya, etc The Hindi phrase 'chori chamaari na karna' means do not steal like a chamaar. The Telugu phrase 'Chaakali chaduvulu' means irregular like a chaakali. Odiya has phrases such as 'ghasia kauthi kara!' which means what a ghasia or what a bad person and 'se chuchha paana ta' meaning he is an absolute paana indicating the person's actions are bad. Chamaar, Chaakali, Ghasia, Paana are 'lower' castes of the respective regions in which the language is spoken. As the examples show, the presence of casteist slurs is not a phenomenon restricted to Kerala alone. However the present day users of these words are quite often unaware of the casteist connotations behind them. Eventhough Kerala is a state with high literacy levels any average Malayali would be surprised to be told that they were being casteist while using these terms. Most of the time, the abuser and even the abused are unaware of the implied Casteism. This again shows how elements of our culture influence the language used (often unconsciously) and this in turn automatically continues to influence future generations of language users. The native languages of India are carrying forward the age old caste prejudices even when the society is slowly progressing. Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit thinker and social commentator, has summed this phenomenon of languages quite aptly when he says "Anything that is Indian, mirrors the Indian culture, the value system. It will contain strongly the flavour of caste prejudice against untouchables". ("Indian Languages Carry the Legacy of Caste")[10] Growing up in such a culture where stereotypes have seeped into their mother tongues caste system becomes a part of identity. When the idea is imbibed insidiously through language it becomes very hard to counter its effects without scientific and systematic counter measures.

III. CONCLUSION

Language is not just a part of culture but a medium through which culture is propagated. Cultural factors are ingrained in us from the day we are born and can play a sizeable role in ending or perpetrating violence. A culture with class violence would reflect it in its linguistic heritage. This linguistic violence is preserved through the generations unconsciously through the continued use of the language. When forms of violence, such as caste discriminations, seep into the language of a culture it has a way of becoming part of the daily life where it finally becomes a way of living.

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⁷ "A Hindu ascetic mendicant of the Sudra or a lower caste". [8]

⁸ "Korava members are the nomad tribes which permeate to length of the Indian peninsula and are likely to be known by different names in different localities." [7]

⁹ Brahmin also spelt Brahman is a member of the hereditary Hindu priestly caste. [9]