

Position of Sanskrit language and Sanskrit Education in Nepal

Rishiram Adhikari, PhD

Assistant Professor, Balmeeki Vidyapeeth

Nepal Sanskrit University, Nepal

adhikaririshiram45@gmail.com

Abstract

Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages of the world. It is known as the language of gods and goddesses. In Nepal, the Sanskrit language has been utilized in educational practices since the time of following Vedic tradition. This study examines the current status of the Sanskrit language and its educational framework in Nepal today. The study seeks the answers of the question why does controversy create in Sanskrit language and education in Nepal. The study followed the qualitative research design and interpretative paradigm. Data from both primary and secondary sources were used in this study. Books, articles, reports were used as secondary source of data. Library and internet research method were used to gather the secondary data. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interview. Three scholars were selected from Kathmandu for in- depth study by using convenient sampling method. Conclusion of the study is based on both primary and secondary source of the data. Government policies controversy on Sanskrit education and language, attitudes of people play role to bring new crisis on Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education in Nepal.

Keywords: Culture, Education, language, Nepal, Religion, Sanskrit, Background

Introduction

Sanskrit is a classical language of the Indian subcontinent.. It belongs to Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European language. Etymological meaning of Sanskrit is derived from the word verbal adjective 'sámskr̥ta'. The word sámskr̥ta' is made with the combination of 'Sam' 'Skrta'. The meaning of 'sam' refers to 'together, good, well, perfected and kṛta refers to 'made, formed, work'.(Louis & Balbir (200). The etymological implication indicates that the Sanskrit language is one of the most sophisticated languages of the world. Sanskrit language related to the Hindu philosophy and religion so that it is also known as the language of gods and goddesses. The language was famous in south Asia around the period of first century. Rig Veda is known as the first authentic text of Sanskrit language. Victor (2007) highlighted the history of Sanskrit language as:

Sanskrit generally denotes several ancient forms of the Indo-Aryan language. The oldest of these is Vedic Sanskrit, found in the Rigveda, a collection of 1,028 hymns composed between 1500 and 1200 BCE by Indo-Aryan groups migrating eastward from the mountainous areas of what is now northern Afghanistan, through northern Pakistan, and into northwestern India. (31)

The Sanskrit language has a history that dates back four to five thousand years and continues to be widely recognized in South Asia. Although it is often referred to as a dead language, it is still spoken in various regions of South Asia. There is ongoing debate regarding the status of the Sanskrit

language, questioning whether it is extinct or still in use. In this regards, P., Sheldon notes, "Sanskrit is a dead language can be somewhat misleading to the general public, as it is clear that Sanskrit is not as inactive as other languages typically considered dead" (311). He disagreed about the statement that Sanskrit is declared as dead language; however, linguists like Pollock, Sheldon already claimed that Sanskrit language is the most influential dead language like Roman. Hanneder further argued that " Sanskrit is ongoing use in spoken, written, and read forms likely leads many to believe it does not conform to the standard definition of a dead language" (311). Pollock's view on the death of Sanskrit exists in a gray area between academic discussion and public understanding, as he observes that most observers would agree that, in some crucial way, Sanskrit is dead.

In Nepal, the Sanskrit language has been utilized since the era of Buddha, as many significant texts of Buddhism are also available in Sanskrit. Dhanavajra Vajracharya, noted the Sanskrit language in official record of Lichhivi period which is the time round 15 hundred years. The official record indicates that Sanskrit was one of the main languages spoken in Nepal during the Lichhivi era. Since the time the language has been used as language of teaching learning and official language, however, except some Sanskrit language written stone and copper plate none of the authentic books and other documents have not found until date. Since the unification of modern Nepal, the Sanskrit language has been employed as a medium for academic discourse and educational instruction, however, Pathasala (school) of Sadananda Adhikari known as "Dingala pathsla" is known as the first Sanskrit school of Nepal that was established in 1932. After two years later than Sanskrit school established in Kathmandu that by Ranodip Singh (Parajuli, Onta, & Upreti, 65). There is so long history of Sanskrit education in Nepal although formal school education has begun in Nepal though Sanskrit education. The importance of the Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education is crucial in the historical evolution of school education in Nepal.

Through analysis of the historical juncture of Sanskrit language and education, the study seek the answers of the question what is the situation of Sanskrit language and education in Nepal and why does the issue of Sanskrit education became controversial in Nepal. In this context, main objective of this study is to analyze the situation of Sanskrit language education in Nepal and highlights the major causes of controversy about Sanskrit language and education in Nepal.

Literature Review

Linguists and researchers from home and abroad (Victor, 170; Louis, 55 Kharel, 10 Adhikari, 15 and Baral ,3) talked various aspects of Sanskrit language and education in Nepal. Mair, H. Victor noted that Sanskrit language is one of the main ancient languages of Nepal that still plays important role on academic discourse"(321). He argued that Sanskrit is an old language but still important in discourse. In this context, Nepali scholar Baral (2023) claimed that "NASA has recognized the value of Sanskrit for its potential use in artificial intelligence. According to the agency, Sanskrit is well-suited for machine learning and computer programming in AI because it is both natural and scientific in writing and reading" (p.3). Sanskrit language is one of the scientific languages because the structure of Sanskrit language is perfect and sophisticated. Louis & Balbir (2004) also highlights of Sanskrit language in south Asia in their book History of Sanskrit language. They focus on the long historical tradition of Sanskrit language in south Asia. Nepali scholar Prem Phayak shows controversy of Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education in Nepal in his article entitled, "The return of Sanskrit education in schools" as: NEFIN opposed the idea of making Sanskrit a compulsory subject in schools, arguing that Brahmins themselves any longer and children belonging to indigenous communities do not speak Sanskrit are struggling in education because they are not taught in their mother tongues. (23)

In contemporary time, indigenous people disagreed with the government policy of promoting Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education in Nepal, however, Sanskrit subject has been teaching as optional subject in secondary level and around 300 Gurukuls and Asharms are running in Nepal to teach Sanskrit education (Education Report.). Except these Gurukuls and Asharms one separate university Nepal Sanskrit university and its 19 colleges including constituent and affiliated are running to teach Sanskrit in university level. More than that Kathmandu university, Tribhuvan university, Lumbini university and other private institutes are also running in Nepal to promote and preserve the Sanskrit language in Nepal. It shows that the popularity of Sanskrit education and Sanskrit language is increasing in Nepal. In this regard, it is relevant to quote public speech of Ram Chandra Paudel that published in the Rinsing Nepal, in 2024 August 3 as "The President stated that the popularity of Sanskrit is rising not only in Nepal and India, but globally as well. He said various universities across the world offering courses on Sanskrit language and literature proved its importance is spreading throughout the world" (The Rising Nepal .1). President Ranchndra Paudel's public speech shows the new hope of Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education in Nepal, however, the Nepal Sanskrit University and Gurkuls are feeling in secure to preserve and promote the Sanskrit education in Nepal

Theoretical Review

In this study, language and social justices are used as theoretical tool of this study because a group of people blamed that Sanskrit is the language of elite and high caste people Sanskrit is the language and education of elite that Paolo Freire explained as education system of elite that never think about social justices. He further justified the idea as, "Banking education is defined as a process by which the instructor uncritically transfers chunks of knowledge rather than making that knowledge the focus of critical reflection and awareness-raising" (p.34). Due to lack of so vial justice and critical pedagogy, Sanskrit education cannot become free from the blame of elite education. In the same line, Filtan Osborn examined the social structure of contemporary society and analyzed the education system that he notes, "Critical Inquiry Cycle provides some guiding principles for the incorporation of critical approaches, including social justice into the world language curriculum. Osborn describes the cycle as "a process of exploration that can be entered into by students, community members, and teacher as learners together, in their individual contexts" (p.33). Language and social justices is one of the crucial issues in multilingual society like Nepal where majority language play role to dominate minority language group. In the case of Sanskrit language and education same philosophy is used, however, now Sanskrit language is not remained as majority language.

There is gap of study on Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education in Nepal so the study fulfils the gap of the study and brings new insight on the study of Sanskrit language and education in Nepal. For that I analyzed the issue on the basis of interpretative paradigm.

Methodology and Material Collection

The study followed the qualitative research design and interpretative paradigm. Both primary secondary sources of data were applied in this study. Secondary data were collected through library and internet search. Primary data were collected through observation and in depth interview. Two experts participated in in-depth interview. Participants of this study were selected through convenient sampling method. Among these two participants, one is selected from indigenous nationalities and next one is Sanskrit scholar. I myself have been teaching in Nepal Sanskrit University and myself reflection and my observation also used to support the main argument. In the process of in-depth

interview, there discussed in two issues situation of Sanskrit language and education and the causes of controversy about Sanskrit language and education. Partisans Participants were selected from Kathmandu valley and given nickname p1 for the first participant and p2 for the second participant because participants did not like to manifest their identities before the readers. Socio economic status of the participants is as follows;

P1 is a 51 years old female from indigenous community, who has been working for the rights of indigenous people. She has passed master degree and has been working in the field of rights of indigenous people since 20 years. She has published many books and articles on the rights of indigenous people.

P2 is male from Brahmin community. He is 71 years old, retired from Sanskrit university as professor. He has sound knowledge about Sanskrit language and education.

Data analysis and Discussion

According to the objectives of this study, the study focuses on the situation of Sanskrit language and education as well as controversies of teaching and learning of Sanskrit education in Nepal.

Position of Sanskrit Language

According to the national population report 2021, there is existence of 124 languages in Nepal including Sanskrit language. The report indicated that Nepali language is the most popular language of Nepal that speak 44.86 % people as mother tongue whereas only 0.5% people speak mother tongue in Nepal. The following table shows total population of Sanskrit mother tongue speakers in Nepal in latest three censuses.

Table: 1 one Population of Sanskrit mother Tongue Speakers

S. N.	Date	Total Number mother tongue speaker	Percent
1	2001	823	0
2	2011	1669	0
3	2021	13960	0.5

Source: National Population Reports, 2001, 2011, 2021.

Table 1 shows the situation of Sanskrit language in three recent population reports. During the time of 20 years the mother tongue of Sanskrit is amazingly increased because in 2001 only 823 people spoke Sanskrit language, however, in 2021 the number reached into 13860 which is controversial. In this regards p1 notes "The increasing number of Sanskrit mother tongue speakers is not real because the number is neither match to total number of Brahmin people or monks so that the number is hypothetical number." (Personal Interview, 2024). P2 has diffident logic on the contradiction on the numbers of Sanskrit mother tongue speakers and notes, " In the past most of the people speak Nepali as mother tongue but now Nepali mother tongue speakers is decreased and new linguistic groups are formed day to day. In the series of adding number of mother tongue speakers Sanskrit mother tongue speakers also increasing in Nepal. Some Hindu community who speak Nepali mother tongue speakers also mentioned Sanskrit as the mother tongue. These are the causes of increasing number of Sanskrit mother tongue speakers in Nepal. (Personal Interview, 2024). P2 has not logic about the increasing number of Sanskrit mother tongue speakers. He claimed that number is not so unnatural because Sanskrit language is still used in Gurukuls as the language of day-to-day conversion.

The situation of Sanskrit language is prestigious in social area because people love to recite Sanskrit quotation in public area. Sanskrit scholars are esteemed as academics, and their social hierarchy is regarded as superior to that of speakers of other languages.. P2 notes, " Sanskrit language is the language of philosophy and knowledge so that people of universe love to speak Sanskrit but it is not easy to speak Sanskrit. I feel proud on my knowledge of Sanskrit" (Personal Interview, 2024). From the argument of p2 it can be said Sanskrit is prestigious language of Nepal but the argument of p1 is different and argued that Sanskrit language is the language of only Hindu people because people recite it only on the occasion of worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses. There is no option to study Sanskrit to other except than the Hindu or Brahmin people in the past so that now it is known as dead language only high caste and Hindu people used politics in Sanskrit language" (Personal Interview, 2024). She is not fully satisfied with the new charm of Sanskrit language. In this context, Phyak notes, "National education curriculum proposed at least one Sanskrit school in every district, setting up of Sanskrit education monitoring unit and scholarship to attract women and students from various ethnic communities to Sanskrit education. The NEC also put forth recommendations for introducing Sanskrit education in higher education PhD and M. Phil" (2). It shows that Nepal government takes interest in the development of Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education. It shows that the numbers of mothering Sanskrit speakers are not so high but the investment on Sanskrit language and education is increasing in Nepal although the situation is contradictory in political level.

Situation of Sanskrit Education in Nepal

Formal education system began in Nepal with Sanskrit education so that role of Sanskrit education is high in the enhancement of education system of Nepal. Until the time of 1950, only few English schools were in Nepal. Most of the schools were Sanskrit Pathasala. Before establishing the National Education System Plan (NESP) Sanskrit education is important in school education, however, after the re-establishment of democracy in 1990 new education policy was introduced in Nepal to promote secular education system. However, there had established a separate university in 1983 in the name of Mahendra Sanskrit University to promote and preserve Sanskrit language in Nepal. In this regards, p2 notes, "During panchayat period, situation of Sanskrit schools were not so bad national education system plan damage the foundation of Sanskrit education so king Birendra compelled to establish separate university for the development of Sanskrit education. During Maoist period more than hundred Sanskrit schools were closed. At that time, Sanskrit education faced crisis in Nepal "(Personal Interview, 2024). He is satisfied with the current state of Sanskrit education, but he advocates for more resources to enhance it further in Nepal. Now, many schools and colleges began Sanskrit education and the number of students increased in existing Sanskrit colleges. In this regard, The Himalayan published the news in 2021 January 8 noted that, "The attraction among Muslim kids towards Sanskrit language has grown tremendously. Thirty-five Muslim students are learning Sanskrit language at present, the number of students studying Sanskrit from Buddhist and Christian communities is also on the rise. (The Himalayan News Service, p.1). The craze of Sanskrit language is increasing in Nepal because the numbers of Gurukuls are increasing in Nepal. In this regards p1 notes" The number of increasing Gurukuls is not bad thing but secular nation provide large amount of resources to the Gurukuls, Asarms and university is not reliable. Now most of the Gurukuls captured the government land and used Pavlov recourses to enhance the Sanskrit education. I am ready to accept the glorious past of Sanskrit language but not Nepal government misused the resources for Sanskrit education "(Personal Interview, 2024). P1 expresses dissatisfaction with the

present state of Sanskrit education and has advocated for the establishment of a separate university for the indigenous population residing in Nepal. Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities opposed to allocate budget for Sanskrit schools in Nepal that create controversy in the enhancement of Sanskrit education in Nepal.

Several factors create problems for the enhancing of Sanskrit language in Nepal, even with a dedicated university focusing on preserving its language and philosophy. A major issue is the widespread misinformation that has resulted in misconceptions among the public. Many people mistakenly view Nepal Sanskrit University as an institution solely for Hindus, associating the Sanskrit language exclusively with Hindu religious and ritual practices. In reality, Sanskrit is an essential part of Eastern philosophy and heritage, encompassing knowledge across various fields, including art, literature, medicine, ancient political systems, and legal practices. Furthermore, political parties and civil society frequently debate the relevance of Sanskrit philosophy to modern life, often considering it an unnecessary burden on the nation. This negative perception further contributes to the decline of the Sanskrit language in Nepal. Certain rigid Hindu practitioners have asserted exclusive ownership of the Sanskrit language, positioning it as a hallmark of Hinduism. This has hindered the sharing of knowledge and philosophical ideas. However, Sanskrit is not confined to a single race or religious group; numerous ethnic communities in Nepal also value the tenets of Sanskrit philosophy and utilize the language to convey their emotions and thoughts. This rigidity and unfair association with a specific religious community have created difficulties for other groups, resulting in criticism in Nepal following its transition to a republic.

Controversy on Sanskrit Education in Nepal

There is big controversy on Sanskrit education in Nepal. Communist Party of Nepal Maoist agitated the Sanskrit education in Nepal during the time of civil war. On the ground of Maoist civil war secularism was established in Nepal. Secularism creates the controversy on Sanskrit education because people of indigenous community raised questions about Sanskrit university. In this regards, P1 notes, "Nepal government still has not made laws to implement secularism so that Hindu people have still got the chance to use resources for their benefit. It is necessary to make laws and implement the secularism in Nepal. (Personal Interview, 2024). She demand to minimize the budget for Sanskrit education and demand to enhance the budget for other sectors. P2 has different opinion about that controversy and notes, " Sanskrit is not the language and education system of one group or caste or religion so that the controversy has no meaning for us. Some foreigners or Christians made propaganda to minimize Hindu and Sanskrit speakers. Sanskrit is better than English so that they create contradiction. (Personal Interview, 2024). P1 attributed the controversy to Christian individuals and the church, urging all indigenous people to acquire knowledge of the Sanskrit language and education. He asserted that Sanskrit is not exclusive to a single group but is, in fact, the language of all South Asia.

From the analysis of the viewpoints of the two scholars, it is found that existing language policies in Nepal is controversial. The contradiction and controversy will be increased in future in policy level as well as practice level. People from non-Hindu indigenous community raised theoretical issued on Sanskrit language and education in Nepal and Hindu people claimed that Sanskrit is not the language and education of particular group. The debate goes side on side in Nepal that creates contradiction to run Sanskrit schools in Nepal.

Conclusion

Sanskrit language and education is one of the vital issues of south Asia including Nepal because it is related to Hindu philosophy and Hinduism. According to the national population, report shows 81.19% people follow Hindu religion. Sanskrit language and education system is the philosophical ground of Hindu so that other religious people behave Sanskrit language and education as matter of Hindu people rather than secular education. After the establishment of secularism in Nepal in 2006, the Hindu community experienced a significant increase in their participation in the advancement of Sanskrit education. At the same time, non-Hindu indigenous groups have raised concerns regarding the Sanskrit language and the education system. There is a push to cut the budget for the Sanskrit university and to lessen the resources provided to Gurukuls and Asarm; nevertheless, the interest in Sanskrit education is growing. The younger generation, regardless of whether they come from Hindu or non-Hindu backgrounds, is showing a heightened desire to learn the Sanskrit language and its educational programs.

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