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Controversy Swirls Around 'Sanskrit Week' Celebrations

By Niharika Mandhana



A Sanskrit-inscribed stone slab at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2006.

Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

In a country where a hundred different mother tongues are spoken, language has always been a hot-button issue.

For the decades after India won its independence from Britain, politicians and activists in the south waged a vigorous battle against making Hindi, an Indo-Aryan language largely spoken in the country's north, India's only official language.

So it's not surprising that a move by the national Central Board of Secondary Education to promote Sanskrit, an ancient language of Brahmin scholars, has raised hackles.

An initiative to revive the language by celebrating "Sanskrit Week" in schools next month has revived opposition by those who see the official promotion of Sanskrit, used in holy Hindu texts, as an attempt to impose the culture of one group of Indians on others.

Critics, who say the move is an assault on India's pluralism, have raised questions about whether the new government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, which has roots in the Hindu nationalist movement, will push a religious and cultural agenda. [The BJP won national elections this year in a landslide.](#)

"If the government tries to promote one particular language, it will create a big problem," said G. Nanmaran, a spokesman for the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party in Tamil Nadu state, which is a part of the BJP-led central government. "The government shouldn't take it for granted that their mandate will let them fulfil any narrow ideology."

Mr. Nanmaran said the government must be given time "to make their intentions clear on whether they plan to fulfil any unannounced tasks that will affect the unity and diversity of the country." He said he didn't know what "undercurrents" were behind the government's moves, but warned that the new administration should be "cautious" not to see its electoral victory as a popular vote for the "Hindutva ideology," a term critics use to describe Hindu fundamentalism.

Hindu groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which has deep ties with the BJP, have long pushed a conservative social agenda. They seek to ban the slaughter of cows, which are revered in Hinduism, and have pushed for a Uniform Civil Code that could do away with religion-specific laws and, minority communities fear, lead to the imposition of the values of the Hindu majority on others. Questions have been raised over how much influence these groups will have on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, [who has focused largely on his economic agenda.](#)

Nalin Kohli, a spokesman for the BJP, said that by promoting Sanskrit the government was only seeking to "expose" students to the language and was "not imposing anything on anyone." He said Sanskrit was India's "national heritage" and "belongs to every Indian."

He pointed out that scholars abroad study Sanskrit. "If international scholars are not considered "saffronized," surely Indian students studying Sanskrit can't be considered that," Mr. Kohli said.

Saffron is a color associated with Hindu nationalism.

The controversy over Sanskrit began with [a circular in June by the Central Education Board](#), which is under the federal government, that declared "Sanskrit Week" celebrations to "provide a medium for popularizing Sanskrit," described by the board as "the mother of all languages."

"Sanskrit and Indian culture are intertwined as most of the indigenous knowledge is available in this language," the circular said.

It recommended "laghubhashanam" or short speech competitions to get students to speak Sanskrit, and events that encouraged them to find links between Sanskrit and other Indian languages. It also suggested screenings of subtitled Sanskrit films on Adi Shankaracharya, a Hindu philosopher, and "Bhagawat Gita – the Song of the Lord" based on a holy Hindu scripture.

This is not the first time such a clash has occurred. Attempts by the previous BJP government from 1999 to 2004 to promote Sanskrit in schools and universities also met with significant opposition from Tamil parties.

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