



Keeping Women Womanly Gendered Language: What's the Fuss?

○ Sharad Joshi

In our last issue (no. 138), Vrushali Dehadroy's essay "Atha to Lingajigysa" dealt with gender stereotypes built into language. According to the author, the assignment, in many Sanskrit-derived languages, of gender to inanimate objects is linked to the perceived value – economic, social or simply psychological – of the objects in question. In several cases, the feminine gender is found associated with a lower status: an indicator, the author argues, of a bias against womanhood. Sharad Joshi sent in this response.

Language does not evolve mathematically and there is no rule in grammar that has no exceptions. Sanskrit, from which Marathi, or at least Brahminical Marathi, is largely derived, has probably the world's richest vocabulary for denoting feminine beauty. It is remarkable that the most effusive outburst enumerating female attributes comes not from a poet like Kalidasa but from the venerable Shankaracharya himself. In all his resplendent treasury of words denoting women, there is one that is of neuter gender. That word is "kalatra". In Sanskrit, there is no derogatory sense attached to the neuter usage. In Marathi, however, "kalatra" has often been used, even by well-known writers, to suggest a certain degree of coolth and frigidity. A husband uses the word "kalatra" with reference to his wife only when physically or emotionally there is so little attachment between them that the wife may as well be sexless. But look at this: "kalatram" also means "hips and loins" and Kalidasa has used the word to signify the great erotic strength in those parts of the

great beauty Indumati:
*Indumurtimiv-udyaamamantha-
vilaasagrihita-gurukalatraam.*

There is certainly a tendency to sort out names as male or female depending upon the sense of strength or virility they convey. A remarkable thing is that this distinction does not respect regional boundaries or time limits.

A very good example comes from France. At the advent of the automobile, the common French word for car was the masculine "le véhicule". As the French grew more familiar with cars, and probably had greater confidence in dealing with them, it was replaced by the feminine "la voiture". Several instances can be quoted where new machines were treated with the respect that is usually reserved for a male, and eventually downgraded to the feminine gender. Yet, the French have never seemed to take offence at this sort of political incorrectness.

In Maharashtra, years ago, I found that rural folk referred to Express and Mail trains as being masculine: (*to* mail, *to* express). However, passenger or goods trains were "she": (*ti* passenger, *ti maalgadi*). Surprisingly, a train that formally is an Express, in the documents

of Railway officials, but lazes along in some parts is called *ti* Express in those quarters.

Until recently, an English gentleman was expected to speak with a stiff upper lip and make sounds only with the movements of the lower lip, the tongue and the teeth. The French have different ideas; according to them, language as a whole boycotts all sounds that would necessitate ungraceful movements of a French woman's lips.

Our forefathers were even more particular. Men of respectable

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descent spoke Sanskrit, which has consonants to represent any sound – harsh and soft – that human beings can produce. That was a great advantage for making a language a crisp vehicle for any idea, from the most ethereal to the most concrete. There were women who mastered Sanskrit, but not housewives and not even queens. They spoke *Ardh-magadhi*, which has softer sounds and few guttural noises. Today, of course, we think that women ought to speak and write the same language with the same expressions and ideas as men. A large number of characteristically feminine interjections and exclamations have died out. That is understandable because, as Morgan’s law ordains, human history will be the history of the increasing feminisation of men and the progressive masculinisation of women. In fact, human history is one of persistent struggle to postpone the day when the two become the same. I have not for years seen men whose moustaches bristle when they are angry and women whose cheeks visibly change colour when they blush. Today’s woman does not have the emotional apparatus of Sita and your modern man has little in common with the giants of yesteryears. Young Maharashtra girls get hardly any opportunity to use expressions like *ishya* and *ayya* to convey a thousand shades of meanings. There are few who can still blush. The gender divide in all languages will gradually disappear and men and women will use languages that are gender neutral.

Only a few decades ago, if a stranger came calling and asked a solitary housewife at home if the master of the house was within, she would not come out, nor see who the stranger was, nor let him see who she was and she would give replies like, “The umbrella is not hanging on the

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peg,” and “I can’t see the turban on the wall.” Speaking out the husband’s name would have been an outrage. Even while making an indirect reference to an object used by the master, she felt a tremble and a flush of blood which men and women today are denied, even when they see, on the small screen, parades of semi-nude men and women exposing themselves, just as the director desires.

The evolution is continuous and changes do not necessarily occur in the same direction in all languages. “*Agni*” (fire) is masculine in Sanskrit, feminine in Hindi but masculine in Marathi. The same is the case with “*Vayu*” (breeze/wind). “*Vyakti*” (person) is masculine in Sanskrit, feminine in Marathi.

Our contact with the English language has created a new problem. Indian philosophy has preached for

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several millennia that the divine life-force is all-pervading and, therefore, most Indian languages have attributed sexuality to non-living things, plants and even animals. Christianity, on the other hand, made the soul the prerogative of the human race alone. Therefore, European languages treat all inanimate things as neuter. But when those words were accepted in Indian languages they were ascribed genders, based essentially on the emotions they generated.

Most languages do maintain a nuance in referring to different genders. Every language has a cultural history in this respect and the culture of language goes on changing concomitantly with the culture of the people who use that language.

The gender systems of languages are not the original guilty party. They only reflect the current cultural situation. Language has been used to slow down the trend that will make the difference between the sexes disappear. The gender system inbuilt in Indian languages certainly does not cause any harm, except to young pupils who are forced to learn different declensions and conjugations by heart. But then again, girls score in mastering languages. With such a massive advantage, Vrushali should not be complaining about ascribing the feminine gender to all that is fine, delicate and soft; unless, of course, woman are becoming ashamed of those qualities. The perspective of the debate would change radically if all women, for a millennium or so, decided to co-habit with men shorter, lighter and less skilled in physical prowess, something today’s women, feminists included, do not seem inclined to do.

The author is the founder of the Shetkari Sanghatan. □