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**The Worship of the Goddess of Language:
Ram Mani Acharya Dixit's Efforts in Standardization
of the Nepali Language in Benares**

ABSTRACT: This paper will focus on a 20th century Nepali intellectual, Ram Mani Acharya Dixit (1883–1972), and his trans-border activities for the promotion of the vernacular by investigating his integration of the progress of a language with his nation, his apotheosis of the vernacular and his devotion in strengthening prose writing for the sake of the development of the divine mother tongue. Foregrounding his linguistic activities such as writing, publishing and printing in Nepal and India, with Benares in particular, it will try to answer questions such as: What was the motivating factor that inspired him to write and publish in the Nepali language? Was he in any way influenced by the Hindi language movement that was at its peak in North India of the time? How influential was Dixit's role in standardizing Nepali? Besides this Nepali language standardization concern, the paper will also examine Dixit's idea of serving mother, motherland, mother tongue and [Hindu] religion through service to a language.

KEYWORDS: Standardization of Nepali, Nepali print history, deification and embodiment of the language, linguistic nationalism, Nepali language movement in Benares

Introduction

Restrictions on the freedom of speech, education, and many other basic human rights in Nepal under the Rana regime (1846–1951) forced many Nepalis to move to the neighbouring country of India. During the last quarter of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century the centre of gravity of scholarly activity among the educated and politically active Nepalis shifted to the main Indian cities of Benares, Bombay and Calcutta. With Benares considered the most prominent among the North Indian publishing hubs and viewed as the foremost centre of intellectual activities, it became the main destination attracting Nepali students looking for educational institutions, the politically exiled Nepalis, print entrepreneurs and writers. Consequently, several Nepali intellectuals flourished in India and specifically in Benares, where they became involved in writing, publishing and printing from the middle of the 19th century onward. Ram Mani Acharya Dixit was one such Nepali intellectual.

Dixit is a well-studied and frequently referenced figure, crucial to understanding intellectual history of Nepal as well as history of Nepali language and literature. Virtually all studies in these disciplines consider him a person of note. A study of the history of Nepali literature would be thought incomplete without mentioning him and his journal *Mādhavī*. Shailendu Prakash Nepal's work in particular showcases Dixit's life and works in detail. However, Dixit's activities in Benares, the influence of Hindi language movement and the Indian independence movement on him, and more specifically, his concept of the goddess in the form of mother tongue or *bhāṣā bhavānī* ("the goddess of language") are not given sufficient attention. This article attempts filling those lacunae. Moreover, it also briefly examines the history of standardization of the Nepali language and the state of current discourse on the subject.

Against this backdrop and relying on Ram Mani Acharya Dixit's diary-based personal narrative, this paper offers a biographical study of his life with primary focus on the role Benares had played in the development of his intellectual preoccupations and the formation of his linguistic nationalism during the years of his stay there and his engagement

with the Prabhakari Company between 1903 and 1908. Dixit's activities in Benares resulted in his detention in Nepal by the Nepali government. Considering the socio-political circumstances of the time, it is only natural that Dixit's life reveals much about Nepal's intellectual life in the first half of the 20th century. Grounding our findings in his life story, this study will demonstrate how he set in motion the standardization of the Nepali language and contributed to its development while living in the Indian city of Benares.

The Hinduization and deification of mother land and mother tongue were the most important outcomes of the Indian independence movement in India. Such devotion meant taking part in the movement, offering one's service to the motherland and thus attaining mysterious spiritual pleasure. The mother tongue became a stand-in for the motherland, and therefore service to one was service to the other; both were the object of a patriotic and spiritual duty. This paper will specifically focus on Dixit's service to and worship of his mother tongue—which was for him indeed a mother goddess¹—and in particular on his efforts in this regard while living in Benares. Dixit's Benares stay and his endeavours there took place much before the prominent Nepali language activists such as Surya Vikram Gyawali, Paras Mani Pradhan, Dharanidhar Koirala and others joined the movement. Hence, it is worth considering Dixit's inspirations and activities in the cause of the mother tongue in the foreign land as those of their predecessor. Furthermore, this paper aims to show how Dixit projected his own sense of the self as a language activist through his diaries and autobiography, and how he sought to portray himself in the minds of his readers. The common strand running throughout the paper is his focus on serving his motherland, and his mother tongue, his efforts in each of these areas being mutually intertwined.

¹ The expressions he uses are *bhāṣā bhavānīko upāsanā* (“worshipping the goddess of language”) and *bhāṣā sevā* (“service to the language”).

Source

This article draws primarily on Ram Mani Acharya Dixit's three autobiographical volumes, *Purānā saṃjhanā* (1972, "Old Memories"), *Prācīn saṃsmaraṇ* (2014, "Old Reminiscences,") and *Samjhanāko bātomā* (2043 v.s.,² "Down Memory Lane"). All volumes were edited and published posthumously by his son Keshavmani Acharya Dixit and based on his father's diary entries. There are altogether 35 diaries spanning the period between 1909, the year he entered the palace service, and 1964, when he was paralysed due to high blood pressure. During the Rana period, the privacy usually accorded to personal diaries was not something Nepali subjects could count on any more than other public rights. Palace employees and other public figures favored by the previous prime minister would regularly suffer during the subsequent period of his successor. After Chandra Shamsheer's death in 1929 and during Bhim Shamsheer's rule (1929–1932), the palace doors were closed to Dixit and difficult days followed. To protect himself from palace investigations he wrote his diaries in a coded script (*kūtākṣar*)³ developed for the express purpose of keeping his diary (Nepāl 2050 v.s.: 21–34). After he heard rumours that the government would seize all his property (*sarvasva haraṇ*), he hid his diaries at the house of a friend and fellow intellectual, Chakrapani Chalise, in Bhaktapur.

Dixit in Benares

The city of Benares has played an important role in the historical, political and literary history of Nepal. It was one of the closest and most attractive destinations for Nepali expatriates fleeing the stringent rules and regulations of the Rana government. The Ranas, who reduced the Shah monarchs to figureheads and ruled the kingdom (1846–1951)

² The *Vikram samvat* (v.s.) used in Nepal is generally 57 years ahead of Gregorian Calendar.

³ See Appendix 2.

while simultaneously cultivating very good relations with British colonial power in the neighboring country of India, were hesitant to allow people of Nepal to study and travel to India or elsewhere abroad. They strictly controlled the import of foreign books and rigorously excluded books written by Indian activists, with whom no one was to maintain any kind of contact or correspondence (Chudal 2016: 231–238). For all its efforts, the Rana administration was swimming against the current. Thus, though they did not wish to, they felt compelled to establish schools and colleges in the country. Furthermore, the acknowledged need for well-trained bureaucrats in the government and Sanskrit literate priests served to keep the door of the country somewhat open (*ibid.*: 168). For the inaugural function of Tri-Chandra College in 1918, Dixit went to the palace to get permission to recite a poem on the occasion. He remembers Chandra Shamsher saying: “Whether this day will turn out as a happy day for [the Rana family of] Nepal or will be a day of utter disaster for [the Ranas of] Nepal is not certain. I do not see that the result of opening a college will be good for [the Ranas of] Nepal. I had to do this because of the times.”⁴

Whether it was a royal family member, a palace employee, or any other person, who was exiled for political reasons or had left for the lack of opportunity, Benares was most often the chosen destination.⁵ Those who went there did so mainly for political, religious or educational reasons, and, to some extent, for economic ones as well. Starting with the famous early writers and scholars such as Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814–1868) and Motiram Bhatta (1866–1896), there was a host of Nepalis who studied in Benares. Other Nepali scholars included

⁴ “hera ājako din nepālkā (rāṇā privārko) nimitta khuśīko din huna āune ho vā nepālko (rāṇāko) sarvanāś garane din huna āune ho. tesako kehī thegān chaina. yo kalej khulanāle pariṇāmamā nepālko (rāṇāko) asal holā bhanane ta ma dekhdīna. kāl bakhāt velāle maile yo kām garanū parana āeko mātra ho” (Dixit 2029 v.s.: 156). All translations into English in this article are by the author if not otherwise mentioned.

⁵ Many individuals accompanied exiled political people, which further enlarged the Nepali population in Benares.

the royal priest Hemraj Sharma and later also Ram Mani Acharya Dixit who studied in Kashi with pandit Gaṅgādhara Śāstrī. Because most of the Nepali scholars had visited and spent some length of their life in Benares, either for educational, religious or other objectives, we can see influence of the city and its milieu on their life and works. Thus, it is relevant to take a closer look at Ram Mani Acharya Dixit in the then Benares and the impressions it left on him.

Until the end of the 19th century the Nepali community was still not much politically aware and the right to rule by the public or the people's power of changing the existing system in the country was not yet a possibility for them. However, Indian influence was gradually awakening such ideas. Thereupon, during the regime (1901–1929) of Chandra Shamsher, the dissatisfaction against Ranas begun to be intensely felt both in and outside the country. Chandra Shamsher's reshuffling of the rolls of succession in the Rana family and the division of Rana clan into A, B and C categories added more insurgents from among the Ranas themselves. The Indian independence movement, the emerging print culture, the linguistic and literary consciousness, and the rising sense of nationalism in India in the last quarter of 19th and the first half of the 20th century made big impression on the Nepali communities there. New forms of political and linguistic (especially vernacular) awareness among them took their lead from the development of Indian independence movement and the Hindi language movement. This hidden or repressed political dissatisfaction among the Nepalis and at the same time the pride of being a Nepali paved its way through the service for language and literature. Such literary activity played crucial role in the making of Nepali literature.

Dixit studied and worked in Benares when the sentiments of Indian nationalism and Hindi language movement were on the rise and Benares had already become a printing hub. His student life is not mentioned anywhere, not even in his autobiography, so we do not have any concrete evidence of his activities as a student there. We can only presume that his first stay in Benares as a teenage student must have left some impression of linguistic activities going on

there. His autobiography starts from his second journey to Benares, in December 1903, that was aimed to take charge of the family-owned press, the Prabhakari Company.

The golden period (*svarṇim kāl*) of Nepali literature in Benares, which focused mainly on Nepali literary publication activities, launching of journals, literary writing and language activities, were the years 1884–1944 (Chudal 2077 v.s.). Dixit was in Benares during the first phase of this period which in many ways enriched Nepali language and literature. When Dixit went to Benares to look after the Press in 1903, Nepali publications and literary writings were gradually making headway there. Founding a publication business named Prabhakari Company⁶ in Benares by the Acharya Dixit family in the last decade of the 19th century is an evidence of Benares being an influential publishing centre. It was the time when Nepalis in Benares also realized the commercial value of printing and many Nepali print entrepreneurs had entered the business. Benares was predestined to become a printing centre for publications in Sanskrit and Hindi followed by Nepali, the languages most associated with Hindu culture. Early printing shops sprang up in the city in the mid-1840s, but it was only after 1857 that commercial presses there started to thrive (Stark 2007: 59). Besides the Prabhakari Company, which was the Dixit family business, some other Nepali print entrepreneurs in Benares had established their businesses as well (i.e., Gorkha Yantralaya, Subba Homnah Kedarnath, Nepali Pustakalaya and Dhundhiraj Rishikesh). Dixit's contemporary exiled Nepalis

⁶ In 1899 Ram Mani Acharya Dixit's father, Kashinath, and his four brothers, Damodar, Sadashiva, Ramchandra, and Harihar, jointly established a publishing house, the Prabhakari Company, in their grandfather's (Shiromani Acharya Dixit) house in Benares with the aim of publishing Sanskrit books. Later they also added their own press, called the Prabhakari Press/Yantralaya. The eldest son Damodar took chief responsibility in the beginning, but he was more inclined to spiritual interests, and so turned over charge of operations to his youngest brother Harihar. But Harihar Acharya had no better luck with the business and shifted to Bombay, where he established his own publishing company, the Gorkha Pracharak Mandal, which, however, did not survive for long. Back in Benares, the Prabhakari Company was still floundering.

who worked as publishers in Benares included Damaruvallabh Pokhrel (Gorkha Yantralaya) and Subba Homnath Khatiwada (Subba Homnath Kedarnath).⁷

Before going to Benares to look after the Press, Dixit was in the service at the palace of the Commander-in-Chief, Bhim Shamsheer. After a couple of years, he fell out of favour with his superior, so was sent by his family to Benares to work at the Press. We can argue that the dissatisfaction and humiliation while a palace employee was the motivating factor of his Benares activities. According to Dixit himself, his Benares travel in 1903 was the first attempt of doing service to the language. He writes:

After being accused and humiliated, finally I could escape the palace of Shri Bhim Shamsheer Saheb and arrived to take charge of Prabhakari. ... I was extremely depressed at that time, but now I feel the moment of my Kashi travel was definitely a good one. ... This was the time I got the punishment and my fate made me a devotee of the language.⁸

In Dixit's words such was the start of his language-based endeavours. It is clear from his statement that the toxic feelings produced by the dissatisfaction and humiliation in Nepal found an antidote in the service to the language. The next section turns to Dixit's various language and literature related activities in Benares.

⁷ See Chudal 2021 for more details on Nepali print entrepreneurs and Nepali printing in Benares.

⁸ "श्री चिप सहेब भिमशंसेरको दारबार्बाटा लान्चाना रा तिरस्कार खहै बाला ताला उमकैरा बनारस प्रबहकारिको काम हेराना पुगे. ... त्यो बेला मेरो मनमा कतोरु खिन्नता थियो, तरा अहिले लागेको, पक्कै पनि त्यो बेला मेरो कसै प्रस्थान साँत राम्रै राहेको. ... यही समयमा मैले कानै नमोठ्याई खाना पार्यो र मेरो अर्थात यही निमित्त मनेरा मलाई एक भ्रष्टासेवी बन्यो" (Dixit 2029: 1).

Linguistic nationalism

Language has played an important role as a component of national-ism and South Asian history has many convincing cases to prove it. In India, Hindi became an important symbol of nationalism and one of the essential concerns of Indian reformers in the Hindi speaking belt during the 19th and 20th century. The broadscale movement which began to project Hindi as the language of the nation started in Benares sometime in 1870s. Service to the motherland or nation and service to the mother tongue or national language came to be regarded as mutually implicative. As a result, writing, publishing and printing in Hindi sprung up in North India, which then enriched Hindi language and literature producing many potential Hindi writers.

In the latter half of the 19th century Benaras, Bharatendu Harischandra and his circle promoted Hindi as *nij bhāṣā* (“[one’s] own language”) and have seen its progress as the root of every progress. The Hindi literary print culture that developed in Benares of the time introduced new literary genres, newspaper essays, skits and dramas as social and political commentaries. Ram Krishna Khatri, alias Verma, encouraged by Harishchandra, established Bharat Jivan Press in Banaras. Motiram Bhatta, again influenced by Harishchandra and working with Verma at his press, founded *Moti maṇḍalī*, a circle of Nepali poets led by Motiram Bhatta, to encourage people to write in Nepali and publish their output. He himself also contributed a good number of Nepali literary works and published several of his own poems in the intervening years. Moreover, Bhatta published Bhanubhakta Acharya’s *Rāmāyaṇa* in September 1884 (considered the first home-grown work printed in Nepali), and the *Jīvan caritra* (Bhanubhakta Acharya’s life story) in 1891, both from Verma’s press.⁹ A famous poetic recitation of Harishchandra that became guiding principle for Hindi linguistic nationalism was also a guideline

⁹ See Orsini 2004 and Bhattarai et. al. 2060 v. s.

for the Nepali intellectuals. Its Nepali translation, published in the first issue of the journal *Candra*,¹⁰ is evidence of it.

The influence of the above-mentioned Indian movement spread all over North India and offered itself as a model to the Nepali intellectuals residing in Benares. But to what extent were the circumstances underlying Indian independence movement and that of the emigrants from Nepal the same? Nepalis were suppressed by the Ranas even as Indians were by the British, but the former could not yet, during the period of Dixit's stay in India, openly agitate against their rulers in Nepal. Hindi speaking community being constructed in India presented Hindi as a powerful, precious, rich and appropriate bonding thread and a source of identity. Under Indian influence, it is convincing, then, that the Nepali desire for political freedom should express itself obliquely, through linguistic nationalism. Indeed, Nepali emigrants residing in India saw Nepali language as a thread uniting them, as the wellspring of their identity. It was their springboard to a feeling of nationalism and the need for public rights and freedom. Unlike Hindi, Nepali had no religious, geographical, ethnic or linguistic boundaries. It would later bring all Nepali-speaking people from various traditions, ethnicities, castes, cultures as well as different parts of Nepal and India together as a single *jāti* (caste).¹¹ It was, of course, also the language of the ruling class in Nepal, who could therefore not deny aspirations advancing the language, even if the same ruling class had reservations about educating the public and letting them freely enjoy the right to study, read, write, or publish.

Continuing to take his cue from the Hindi language movement in Benares, Ram Mani Acharya Dixit was distraught by the poor state of

¹⁰ "nij bhāṣāko unnati sab unnatiko mūl/ bin nij bhāṣā gyānale meṭidaina ura sūl/ nagara bilamba e bandhuvara utha aba meṭana sūl/ gara nij bhāṣā unnati pratham jo sabako mul" ("Progress of one's own language is the root of all progress;/ Without knowledge of one's own language the pangs of the heart cannot be erased./ Do not delay, O best of friends, rise up now and erase the pangs./ Make progress in your own language which is the first root of everything." The poem and its English translation are from Chalmers 2003: 135).

¹¹ This sentiment reached its peak between 1920 and 1940. See Chalmers 2003.

his mother tongue (*dīna hīnā māṭṛbhāṣā ko svarūp*). Finding examples of written Nepali literature only in poetry, he went looking for samples of published Nepali prose but could find none. There was a market for metered Nepali poems and songs in Benares but none for prose, and he blamed Nepali intellectuals in Benares for writing and publishing only for money (Ācārya Dikṣit 2029 v.s.: 4) as poetry was easily sold in the Nepali print market. As the first step, he started writing some experimental/trial prose himself and was satisfied that it could be done. He wanted to develop the Nepali language as *sarvāṅga sundarī* (“beautiful in every respect”):

The mark of the Indian independence movement must have lain on me. Through it—a feeling that I should do something for the country—the desire must have arisen in me to serve the country and its people through service to the language. In any case, I started to understand the situation the Nepali language was in. My heart cried at seeing the critical situation of the Nepali language. I had no peace of mind and was troubled day and night wondering how to uplift the language, how to serve it [her]. I didn’t have much patience. I wanted to put my hand to everything all at once.¹²

His eventual aim was more ambitious: “I merely want to bring Nepali up to the same level as other advanced languages of the world.” (Dikṣit 2029 v.s.: 99)¹³

Besides publishing in Nepali and being active in the field of the propagation of the Nepali language, Dixit also tried to gain recognition for Nepali in the examination board of the United Provinces of

¹² “bhāratīya svatantratā āndolanko mamā chap pareko hunū paradacha. tesale malai panī deśko nimitta kehī garūbhanane bhāvanāle ghacaghacāera bhāṣāsevābaṭa desh ra deshvasīko sevā garane icchā paidā bhaeko hunuparadacha. je hos nepālī bhāṣāko avasthā bujhna thālen. tyo bela nepālī bhāṣāko duravsthāle dil royo. katābaṭa kasarī bhāṣāko uddār garū, sevā garū, bhanane kurāle din rat pīralana thālyo. tetī dhairyā thiena. cāraitira ekaicoṭī hāt hālana man lāgyo” (Dikṣit 2029 v.s.: 8).

¹³ “ma ta khālī nepālī bhāṣālāī viśvakā arū pragatīṣīl bhāṣāko samakakṣamā puryāuna cahanchu.”

British India. When Dixit read the news about this having come about in the *Gazette*, he claimed it as his first achievement in the service of his mother tongue:

It was written [in the *Gazette*] that exam will also be taken in Nepali. A noble person can understand how much joy and pleasure it brought to me. I cannot explain this situation in words. Thus, I obtained my first achievement in the service of [my] mother tongue. May the mother tongue be victorious!¹⁴

Various visions of Indian linguistic nationalism were not only limited to propagation, publishing and reform. In the following section we will see that language was also worshiped and embodied by the nationalists and how Dixit responded to it.

Deification and embodiment of the language and the nation

The construction of nationalism in colonial India imagined modern nation through the gendered metaphor of mother and/or glorious female deity. The many faces of “mother”—mother land, mother nation, motherhood, mother tongue or mother goddess—functioned as influential symbols. It was a continuation of the Hindu tradition of worshiping the natural elements as gods, embodied as either male or female, but with a nationalistic colour supplement. The earth is *devī*, a goddess, and at the same time, a mother. *Vande mātaram* (“I Worship the mother[land]”), the national song of India found in the famous nationalist novel *Ānandamaṭh* by Bāṅkimcandra Chattopādhyāya, became a powerful expression of Hindu nationalism. The Hindi language was also religiously personified

¹⁴ “... dekhī nepālīmā panī jāc līne kurā dekhīeko thiyo. malāī tyo beālā kati ānanda ra khuśī bhaeko holā bujhnele jānane kurā cha–bayān garera yo sthīlīlā samjhāuna śakne mero kṣamatā chaina. māṭṛbhāṣāko sevāmā malāī pahilo saphalatā yasarī upalabdha bhaeko ho.

Jaya māṭṛbhāṣā!” (Dīkṣīt 2029 v.s.: 7).

as the Hindu mother. On the other hand, Nepali, though not a mother tongue of every Nepali, had not yet ethnic limitations in those days so potentially could become the mother of all Nepalis. Advancing, respecting, and standardizing mother tongue was regarded as a way of worshipping Mother Goddess. All forms of advancement of and respect for the mother tongue were regarded as the country's own. A rich language was taken to be a sign of a developed country.

After Harischandra's influential guidelines for the progress of one's own language, another prominent Indian intellectual of the period, Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi (1864–1938), Dixit's contemporary, also expressed his opinions along the same lines, and these too became a further guide for Hindi nationalists. In his opinion reading, writing or speaking any other language (i.e., English) than the mother tongue (i.e., Hindi) was considered disrespectful to the mother and therefore to the nation. Further, those who did not serve their language and literature were considered disloyal to the society, country, people and themselves. Moreover, such an act was equivalent to suicide (Simha 2008: 59).

We can also see impression of this Indian intellectual development among the Nepalis. The “mother” metaphor was immensely popular with the Nepali writers. The vocabulary used for the mother land included *deś mātā* (‘country the mother’), *mātrbhūmi* (‘mother land’), *nepāl āmā* (‘mother Nepal’) or *āmā* (‘mother’). Nepali intellectuals used the concept of mother tongue and mother land and juxtaposed it with the mother. They defined her as person's other mother who nurtures her child just as the birth mother does. The Nepali journal, *Sundarī*, published in Benares when Dixit lived there, had already used this term for the Nepali language. Announcing its launching in its first editorial it declared that not everyone could understand Sanskrit hence it would be best to rely on the common people's own mother tongue, the Nepali language.¹⁵ Sada Shiva Sharma, a contemporary of Dixit and the editor of another journal, *Upanyāsa taraṅgiṇī*, writes, “today our mother (Gorkha) tongue travels from one place to another

¹⁵ Cited in Chalmers 2003: 116.

crying for a shelter”¹⁶ This also shows that the sons of a Nepali mother, the Nepali writers or publishers in Benares, were busy rescuing, protecting and advancing their mother. Dixit also wrote a lengthy article, “Mātṛbhāṣāko āvaśyakatā” (“The necessity of the mother tongue”) in *Mādhavī* (vol.1, no. 5). Later, journal *Candra* (vol. 1, no 1.) published an editorial and defined mother tongue as one’s other mother, the one who nurtures the child. Moreover, mother tongue is the language that a child speaks with his inexpert tongue to communicate with his mother. Therefore, serving mother is one’s dharma—a socio-religious duty—so is it to serve one’s mother tongue, with the help of that very language one has been nurtured in (Chalmers 2003: 136–137). Furthermore, B. Sama (v.s. 2054: 388) claimed that he was the very first poet to actually address the country as *Nepāl āmā*. However, he acknowledges, though, that a similar expression, *Nepāl mātā*, was current in the country four hundred years earlier, citing as evidence a sculpted representation from the times of King Pratāp Malla.¹⁷

Dixit’s autobiography, referring to the period when he went to Benares to take over responsibility for the Prabhakari Company in November 1903, tells how the deification process of Nepali started in him:

As soon as I entered the press, my affection for language rose along with that towards printing and publishing. Until that day I did not know how much love for my country was there in me. My affection for Nepali and Nepaliness led me to worship the language [as a] goddess. I learnt that Prabhakari had been publishing Hindi, Sanskrit, and, occasionally, Nepali books. My first campaign involved prioritizing Nepali and promoting Sanskrit books written by Nepalis.¹⁸

¹⁶ Cited in Śrestha & Paudyāl 2077 v.s.: 443.

¹⁷ See Chudal 2014 for more details.

¹⁸ “presmā lāganū ke thiyo, mudraṅ ra prakāshanko sāthai bhāṣā prati mero mamatā baḍhna lāgyo. tyo din samma malaī āphailāi panī patto thiena mamā rāṣṭra prem yattiko cha bhanera. nepālī ra nepālīyatā pratiko mero mamatāle tyahībāṭa bhāṣā bhavānīko upāsanā garne upakram banāuna thālyo. pahile prabhākari mā hindī saṃskṛt ra kehī chūṭ pūṭ nepālī kitāb chāpine gareko rahecha. mero pahilo abhiyānai presmā

Dixit then clarifies how his interest was raised towards serving his country and mother tongue:

My aim was to devote myself to the advancement, respect, and standardization of the mother tongue. Regardless of how things stood in Nepal, Nepalis residing in India were influenced by the [Indian] independence movement. It would be hard to say that every wise Nepali heart was not engraved with the will to do something for the country in this life and pay back the debt to their mother [nation]. Such was my own feeling.¹⁹

Dixit further realised that service to his mother tongue, Nepali, is a service to his mother land, Nepal. For him the mother tongue became a stand-in for the mother land. We can see an example of such sentiment in Dixit's diary entry of 16 May 1914: "O motherland! May my body be devoted in your service. I serve you guided by the idea that service to the mother tongue is also your service, bless me so that I obtain my desire."²⁰ It is also worth mentioning here that the Nepali language at the time of Dixit's writing these words was frequently designated as the language of the "Gorkha" or "Gorkhali" but Dixit addresses it as "Nepali."

The terms Dixit used for Nepali, his mother tongue, were *āmā* ('mother'), *māṭṛbolī* or *māṭṛbhāṣā* ('mother tongue), and *bhaṣā bhavānī* ('the language goddess'). Adulation of language not only as a mother

nepālīlāi prāthamikatā dīdai nepālī lekhakle lekhekā samskṛt pustaklāi panī jan-samakṣa lyāune tira bhayo" (Dīkṣit 2029 v.s.: 3).

¹⁹ "lakṣa thiyo, māṭṛbhāṣāko utthān, sammān ra pariṣkṛtatāma kasarī āphūlāi arpaṇ garna śkūlā bhanne. nepāl bhitra je sukī bhaetā pani bhāratmā basekā nepālīlāi svatantratā āndolanko hāvāle choeko nai thiyo. deśko nimitta kehī garera marna pāe, māṭṛbhāṣā hune thiyaū bhanne bhāvanā buddhi bhaekā nepālīko hṛdayamā aṅkit thiēna holā bhanna gahārai pardacha. mero āphnū bhāvanā pani yastai thiyo" (Dīkṣit 2029 v.s.: 6).

²⁰ "he māṭṛ-bhūmi tapāiko sevā garnāmā mero yo śarīr lāgos. māṭṛbhāṣāko sevā panī tpāi kai sevā ho bhanne samjhī tapāiko sevā gardachū, malaī āśīrvād dunuhos—jasma ma saphal manorath huna sakū" (Dīkṣit 2029 v.s.: 79).

but as a goddess is something exceptional, as we see in Dixit's writings. Worshiping Mother India as a goddess, the map of India as an embodiment of a female deity, building her temples, carving statues and printing posters of Mother India had become a common phenomenon in India (Gupta 2001 Ramaswamy 1997, 2001) but acts such as regarding the language as a goddess were not so common in Nepal. Hindi nationalists often called Hindi a daughter of Sanskrit and Urdu her co-wife. Perhaps deification was not considered a necessity as the goddess Saraswati happened to be the goddess of wisdom. However, Dixit added a new metaphor, of *bhaṣā bhavānī*, to the discourse. The term *bhaṣā bhavānī* carried his original, spiritual devotion to the mother tongue, a devotion not seen among his coeval literary writers. His immense adoration of the mother tongue and its deification gradually grew, to the extent that he performed a ritual vow.²¹ In the Navaratra of 1908 he worshipped the goddess Durga for nine days, recited the *Durgāsaptāśatī*, and on the final day made a vow to her: "I will establish a Nepali monthly journal named *Mādhavī* and appoint your well-wisher and attendant, Prasad (Matri Prasad Sharma Adhikari), its editor. May my magazine progress in the future and spread love for the language among the public."²² The adoption of this name—Matri Prasad Sharma Adhikari—as his pseudonym was again motivated by his linguistic nationalism: *mātr* in Sanskrit means 'mother' and *prasād* means 'graciousness,' so their combination expressed the favour he craved from the goddess in her form as the mother tongue; Sharma and Adhikari were common Brahmin family names. At the upcoming full moon, he launched a literary magazine, *Mādhavī*, in Benares.²³

²¹ Renowned Hindi writer Rahul Sankrityayan also performed similar *sadhana* in Navaratra of 2011, in Benares, convinced by a Nepali religious ascetic Purnananda (Chudal 2016: 277–278).

²² Dikṣit 2029 v.s.: 21.

²³ Dixit's service to his mother tongue was selfless and religious. He felt it an insult to be paid for such a sacrifice. After the fall of the Ranas and rise of democracy in Nepal he applied for a pension for his 32 years of service at the palace, but the Prime Minister B. P. Koirala's government denied the request; it did, however,

The standardization of Nepali: the *halanta* boycott campaign

Publishing and disseminating literary journals, contributing to such journals, and encouraging participation in literary gatherings formed the main rituals of worshipping the mother tongue and performing nationalistic acts in the first half of the 20th-century North India. Nepali and Hindi literary writings of that period first appeared in journals and the writers or devotees of the mother tongue were, not all, but partly, editors or publishers of such journals. Many Hindi and Nepali journals were published in India during those days (see Orsini 2010, Simha 2008 & Chudal 2077v.s., 2021), with more than two dozen of Nepali literary journals having been launched in Benares before 1950. The journals not only enriched the literature but also contributed to the standardization of the Nepali and Hindi languages.

When in 1903 Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi accepted the editorship of *Sarasvatī*, the popular Hindi journal of the time, he set a code of conduct for himself. One of the set goals was drawing the attention of its readers and contributors to mistakes in the grammar and stylistic usage in Hindi, and the need to correct them (Simha 2008). Until then there had been no prescriptive uniformity of language usage in South Asia. Neither Hindi nor Nepali had yet produced a standardized vernacular. As both languages were relatively new to publications, there was much to be done to establish orthographic norms for them. In Hindi, controversies swirled around the proper use of particles, inflections, spellings and declinations (*ibid.*: 192–263). Dwivedi did much to bring order to this chaos through his editorial responsibilities in *Sarasvatī*. By comparison, Nepali had more divergent features. Absence of a proper

agree to a monthly allowance of 200 rupees for an old servant of the language. Dixit did not accept it, saying a son does not receive remuneration for performing service for his mother. This attitude was also seen during the Hindi language movement in India, when Hindi writers refused to receive money for their published works. One such was Jayashankar Prasad, who considered that payment for any of his writing defiled his pure devotion to Sarasvati, the goddess of learning (Orsini 2010: 61).

grammar and lexicon to follow and maintain uniformity of the language, lack of guidelines how to adopt loan words, no uniformity in spellings as well as different writing styles were the main among them.

Against this backdrop Ram Mani Acharya Dixit brought up the issue of Nepali language reform. He started *halanta* boycott campaign as one of the important components of written standardization. We may consider his *halanta* boycott campaign as the first, effortful step in the history of standardization of the Nepali language. One may ask, what is the importance of this campaign in the history of Nepali language? The *halanta* is merely a sign for a consonant not to be pronounced with an inherent vowel. How can it be so important in forming linguistic guidelines?

Generally, in the written form of Sanskrit, a sign is placed at the end of a word to signal that its final consonantal syllabic is not to be pronounced with an inherent vowel (e.g., क् k, ख् kh). Sanskrit language is spoken as it is written. But other languages derived from it and using the same Devanagari script, languages such as Hindi and Nepali, do not follow this directive. Nowadays the silent vowel 'a' in the middle or at the end of most words in those languages is not singled with a *halanta* sign. The inherent vowel 'a' is written but not pronounced in those language. This disagreement between pronunciation and writing was already settled in the Hindi language by just boycotting *halanta* sign and if encountered in submitted writings, it was corrected by the editors (i.e., Dwivedi) but Nepali of those days did not have yet any proper writing system in place hence the unchecked use of *halanta* turned up.

Moreover, Nepali literature until then was dominated by poetry written in classical metric verses following Sanskrit literary tradition. Accordingly, the early Nepali written in metric verses used lots of *halanta* consonants to mark the absence of an inherent vowel. The use of *halanta* was further escalated to help the poets in reducing the number of vowels in the metric verses. Sometimes, as Dixit claims, the poets went so far that they didn't hesitate even to consider short vowels as consonants in their verses. Moreover, the Nepali tongue does not pronounce the inherent vowel 'a' when it comes at the end and in the middle with three or four syllable nouns. In such cases as well the *halanta* sign was placed to indicate

absence of the inherent ‘a.’ Thus, the written Nepali until the first quarter of the twentieth century had overflowing *halantas* in writing.

Observant of the above situation, Dixit argued for the abandonment of the *halanta* sign from the writing system as the readers knew themselves if they needed or not to pronounce the inherent ‘a’ in the word. Dixit had not realised this to be a problem until he started working in the press. Once he became engaged in the publication business in Benares, he was surprised to learn that *halanta*-marked letters posed difficulty in printing Nepali books—something Hindi and other languages using Devanagari script did not have to contend with as they had already abandoned it.

Dixit’s main argument for *halanta* boycott was that it would make printing easier. Boycotting *halanta* and at the same time abandoning special conjunct letters, and the use of fundamental Devanagari characters without conjunct consonants instead, would reduce the number of types in type setting and save typesetter’s time. This was financially beneficial for the press and the publisher. He also argued that Hindi and Nepali have same roots, that is Sanskrit. Dixit realized that Nepali intellectuals intentionally sought to highlight differences between Nepali and Hindi and other neighbouring Indian languages, and that the use of *halanta* was one convenient way to do so. Dixit’s argument against its use was that no semantic or phonetic ambiguity could arise when the reader was already familiar with the language. If a word in Hindi is pronounced without an inherent ‘a’ but without signalling this with a *halanta*, why could not the same system be used in Nepali?

We are suffering from the confusion of [wishing to] distinguish our mother tongue from that of our neighbour—of crippling and handicapping it. I do not think it good to debase it because of such confusion, even with the tools of a developed era. I had to become involved with the reform of language. I was compelled to take a great vow of service to the language out of a sense that not reforming language would not be good for the Nepali people.²⁴

²⁴ “hāmīle panī hāmro mähāmānyā mātṛbhāṣāko svarūp apāṅga vikṛtāṅga banāudai āfnā chimekī bhāṣābāṭa pharak pāri ubhyāune vyāmohle vikāśīl jamānāko upakaraṅharubāṭa pani dusādhyā garāunū ṭhik jasto lāgena. mātṛbhāṣāko sudhārmā

In Dixit's opinion, *halanta* was a hurdle in the development of the language because children would learn the language more easily if there was less use of conjuncts and the *halanta*. Furthermore, the *halanta* and conjuncts reduce the beauty of the mother tongue. Dixit writes that the question of terminating the *halanta* had bothered him for five years after his arrival in Benares. Then finally he decided that “*halanta bahiškār nagarī bhaṣāko unnati sambhav chaina*” (*halanta boycott is necessary for the development of the language*) (Dīkṣit 2029 v.s.: 23). This idea caught his fancy, and he started a campaign to write Nepali prose without any *halantas*, a campaign that became known as the *halanta bahiškār āndolan* (*halanta boycott campaign*). As Nepali literary prose was written very rarely, he hoped that the change would encourage people to write more prose.

The *halanta* in Nepali is also known as *khuṭṭā kāṭeko*, literally ‘one whose leg has been cut off.’ Dixit's companion, Lekhnath Paudel, supporting this campaign wrote a satirical stanza describing rainy season in his book *Ṛtu vicār* (“Thoughts on the Seasons”) where he portrays the collapsing of tall boundary walls because of rain, just like the *halanta* letters of the Nepali poets.²⁵ Deification and embodiment of mother tongue was so deeply ingrained in Dixit's mind that he imagined using *halanta* sign or not using proper writing system in the Nepali as disrespectful to her as mother/goddess or similar to carelessly running a saw across a mother's body. Concerning the *halanta* in particular, he writes that using it for him was like butchering a mother's body: “Let us not be Nepalīs who enjoy cutting up, moving a saw across and even dismembering a mother's body.”²⁶

Mādhavī was launched by Ram Mani Acharya Dixit in Benares with the aim of making it a showpiece of his campaign and encouraging

nalāgī bhaena, bhāṣāko sudhār nabhaī nepālīko bhālo chāina bhanane bhāvanāle malāī bhāṣā sevā mahāvratama dīkṣā lina bādhyā garāyo” (Dīkṣit 2029 v.s.: 5).

²⁵ “herī naśakanū pārī parakhāla baḍebaḍe/ nepālī kavile khuṭṭā kāṭekā varṇa jhaim laḍe” *Varṣā vicār*, v. 97.

²⁶ “āmāko aṅga viccheda panī ārā calāūdai/ majā mānne reṭatāmā nepālī hāmī kvai nahūm” (Cited in Nepāl 2050 v.s.: 85).

Nepali prose writing in its standardized format. *Mādhavī* stood at the forefront of executing Dixit's strategy. Main objective of this launching was to encourage people to write prose against the popular poetic tradition and stop excessive use of *halanta* and unnecessary conjuncts in Nepali writing. Dixit used it as a platform to showcase standardised Nepali. Every issue carried a notice for the contributing writers saying, "*halanta* will not be included in the article." The journal functioned as a workshop for *halanta* boycott. Dixit himself published a long article "Kavitā rītī" ("Style of writing poetry") in a five-part series starting from the second issue of *Mādhavī*. There, along with the poetic theory, he discusses the correct use of words and grammar for powerful writing and provides examples with correct and incorrect spellings of common words according to his theory of *halanta* boycott. He also encourages writers to write prose while not forgetting to convince them about abandoning *halanta*. He further notes that if the newcomers practice such writing for some months, they will gradually feel comfortable with it (Nepāl 2050 v.s.: 114–145).

Soon after Dixit started this campaign, he realized that without a standardized grammar and a good lexicon the situation of Nepali would not improve. He did not write a grammar himself but as a secondary initiative, he requested his uncle to write a Nepali grammar. Following his instructions, the *Gorkhā vyākaraṇ bodh* ("Introduction to Gorkha Grammar") was eventually published in 1913 under the name of his cousin, Vishvamani Acharya. After Dixit's initiative, two more grammars were written in Nepali in Nepal: *Prākṛt vyākaraṇ* (1911) by Jaya Prithvi Bahadur Singh²⁷ and *Candrikā gorkhā bhāṣā vyākaraṇ* (1913) by Hemraj Sharma. Others followed with *Madhya candrikā vyākaraṇ* (1919) by Somnath Sigdyaal, *Nepālī vyākaraṇ* (1920) by Parasmani Pradhan, *Racanā darpaṇ* (1937), *Hrasva dīrghako savāī* (1940) by Gopal Pandey, and *Nepali sajilo vyākaraṇ* (1944) by Pushkar Shamsher. Among these, Hemraj Sharma's *Candrikā*

²⁷ Believed to be an adaptation of Virendra Keshari Arjyal's grammar, incomplete and never published.

gorkhā bhāṣā vyākaraṇ (1913) became influential and set the standard for modern Nepali language. Sharma's grammar adopted a middle path in the writing system: the *halanta* ceased to be used for nouns but was still used for verbs because only *halanta* could differentiate different persons of some verbs (i.e., *padh* second person, low respect imperative, *padha* second person, middle respect, imperative). However, Dixit's suggestion to use less conjuncts was not applied by any of the grammarians. Sharma's system was followed in and outside the country in the publication of books and journals. It was supported by language activists such as Paras Mani Pradhan, Surya Bikram Gyawali, and others in Darjeeling and Benares.

The *halanta* boycott campaign had many supporters as well as detractors in India and Nepal. The first two supporters of this campaign in Benares were Ram Prasad Satyal and Kalidas Parajuli who worked for *Mādhavī* with Dixit and under his guidance. Later, prominent Nepali writers of his time: Sadashiva Adhikari, Taranath Sharma Nepal, Lekhnath Paudel, Baburam Bhandari, Chakrapani Chalise, Yadunath Ghimire, Piyush Jung Rana, Siddhi Prasad Upadhyaya, Mularidhar Jha, Mohan Darjeeling, Kalpasundari Prayag and Devi Prasad Upadhyaya also joined the campaign from Nepal and India. The main detractors in Kathmandu were the prominent writers of Nepali literary world of the time: Shikharanath Suvedi, Somnath Sigdel, Hemraj Sharma, Pushkar Shamsher and Balkrishna Sama. The conflict between those who backed using the *halanta* in Nepali versus those who wished to abandon it continued somewhat longer. Dixit had many supporters as long as he was in Benares. However, his return to Kathmandu and the official authorization and support for Hemraj Sharma's grammar by the Rana government gradually decreased the number of his followers and soon he was literally left alone with his campaign.

It would be relevant to take a look at some of the prose publications during and shortly after Dixit's time in Benares to see the consequences. Some of the publications of the time have followed Dixit's guidelines whereas others have continued using *halanta*. *Mīthā mīthā gīt* and *Bihā ko silok* published in 1908 from Darjeeling by Hazirman Rai do not use *halanta*. Similarly, *Landan rājīlak yātrā* (1913), written by Sher Shing

Rana and edited by Ram Prasad Satyal, who was a supporter of Dixit, also do not have excessive use of *halanta*. However, other publications of that time have *halanta*. George Abraham Grierson's examples in his book, *Linguistic Survey of India*, have some specimens of Nepali with *halanta* in it. Grierson does not mention the dispute regarding the use of *halanta* among the Nepalis but does not pass over the chance to comment on it:

In most of the modern Indian Vernaculars a final a is silent. ... This is not the case in *Khas-kurā*, in which this final short a is pronounced, and भ्रातृ would be pronounced *bhāga*. If a word ends in a silent consonant the fact must, in the Nāgarī character, be indicated by the sign or *virāma*. ... it is however, fair to point out that just as we are careless in dotting our i's and crossing our t's, so Naipālīs are very careless in the use of this *virāma*, and frequently omit it when it should be written. (Grierson 1916: 21)

Dixit realised that a good lexicon was necessary for the progress of a language. Towards that end, he bought and read as many books in Nepali as he could, but he came to realize that the vocabulary of the language was very poor; the same words were constantly being repeated to express the same ideas. As the third level of worshipping his mother tongue, he himself started composing a lexicon while still in Benares. By the time he departed from Benares he had collected almost eight thousand words. He continued working on this lexicon, which he named *Maṇikoś*, but did not live long enough to see it published.

The Prabhakari Company improved a lot after Dixit took charge. Its sales, too, grew. On top of this, Dixit begun exporting printed books to the Rana palaces and many Rana households in Kathmandu. However, besides devoting himself to literary, publishing and linguistic pursuits the young and energetic Dixit, then in his twenties, started reading revolutionary newspapers such as *Bande Mataram* and *Yugantar* (Calcutta), *Keshari* (Puna), and *Keshari* (Nagpur). By placing himself alongside India and Indians he started thinking of Nepal and its innocent people:

Such was the situation of company [press] and Nepal, however, my opinion was influenced differently by *Bande Mataram*. To say the truth, after experiencing in-house activities in the Rana palace, I was reluctant to the service [service in the palace]. The Indian independence movement had taught me that one must devote oneself to one's own country and its people as well as achieve development using one's own intellect and dedication.²⁸

Dixit came to be so caught up in the movement that he printed flyers containing the song *Vande mātaram* at his Press and taught the employees to sing it after working hours. Other Indian patriotic songs he would print and distribute as leaflets. He turned all his employees into strong supporters of the independence movement. He further engaged himself in nationalistic efforts of Indian independence movement such as gathering government students and practicing arrow shooting aimed at a white earthen pot meant to symbolize a British head, singing *Vande mātaram* and so on. He established links with revolutionary individuals (i.e., Indian leaders Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Brahma Bandhav Upadhyaya and a Nepali revolutionary, Pratiman Thapa) which alarmed the Ranas, who consequently, in 1908, summoned Dixit back to Nepal. Overtly he was supposed to take care of some land in the Tarai but instead found himself appointed by Chandra Shamsher to a post in the palace so that an eye could be kept on him. Dixit's uncles Harihar and Devraj had previously been called back to Kathmandu and asked to clarify the situation. Both came through unscathed, but Chandra Shamsher was still suspicious, and so concocted a plot to bring Dixit back permanently. Dixit's journal *Mādhavī* had seen only eight numbers, the *halanta* boycott campaign was slowly gaining momentum, he had just started out on the revolutionary path, and the Prabhakari Press was slowly recovering, and indeed progressing, but the bubble burst.

²⁸ “yatā kampaṇī ra nepālīko yo sthiti utā mero vicār dārāmā ‘vande mātaram’ ko ārako prabhāv. sāccai bhanne ho bhane, rāñājīkā darabārkā bhitrī cāl-calanle mero manmā sevābhāv tira ghṛṇā paidā garāeko thiyo. svatantra vātāvaranmā buddhi ra lag-anle unnati gradai deś ra deśvāsīko bhālo citāunu pardacha bhanane kurā bhāratko svatantratā āndolanle sikāeko thiyo” (Dixit 2029: 59).

Dixit's return to Kathmandu and the end of *Mādhavī* weakened his campaign. Once back in Nepal, Dixit's strong desire to nurture his mother tongue and his devotion to publishing led him to send repeated requests to the Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher through his father Kashinath, who was an employee at the palace, to allow him to open an office dedicated to publishing textbooks and other books in Nepali. Following Dixit's initiative, the Gorkha Bhasha Prakashini Samiti (The Gorkha Language Publishing Committee), a reflection of Dixit's continuing devotion to the Nepali language, was established in 1913 in Nepal, and Dixit remained its chairman for 19 years. Though the chairman of the committee, Dixit did not enjoy freedom of applying his own language standardization strategies as he did in *Mādhavī* in Benares. Under the strict Rana regime, he was compelled to respect instructions to follow Hemraj Sharma's grammar for official tasks, very much against his theory of *halanta* boycott.

Dixit came to realize that the Ranas had cleverly managed to curtail his activities and were keeping him in line in Nepal under their supervision. In his opinion, his nineteen years long chairmanship of the committee was also the result of his Benares activities. He suspected that it was the reason for the government not trusting him with his linguistic approach. He wrote:

My propagating activities in India must have been the reason for my 19-year long chairmanship. The government might have thought that if they dismiss me from the post, I can engage myself in some other nuisance. It was obvious. Due to these reasons the government was wide-awake in my case. Had this not been the case the government would have not appointed six scholars to examine the books written [under the supervision of] the committee. One or two persons would have been sufficient.²⁹

²⁹ “maile lagātār 19 varṣa samiti calāuna pāeko panī tehī hindusthānko pracārakai phal hunū pardacha. samitibāṭa hatārdiemā ma pherī kunai ārko upadravtira phasū-lā bhanne vicār sarakārle garyo holā. tyo garnū panī svābhāvikai ho. inai sabai kāraṅle ma sarkārko najarmā caḍhna gaeko mānis thiē. teso nabhaeko bhae maile samitibāṭa lekhāekā pustakhrū jācnālāi 6 janā dhurandhar vidvān sarkārle khaṭāunū pardainathyo. ek vā duī jnā bhae pugnū pardathyo” (Dixit 2072 v.s.: 26).

Despite Dixit's passion for service to his mother tongue or *bhaṣā bhavānī*, why did his *halanta* campaign fail? Though deeply devoted to the language and literature, employed at the palace and acting as the chair of the Gorkha Bhasha Prakashani Samiti, Dixit still could not officially put his theory into practice. His desire was not very demanding, but he was still unsuccessful. Why did he fail? Working at the palace, he could clearly put his arguments and convince the authorities. He could also seriously discuss the issue with Hemraj Sharma, person more powerful than him with the palace and whose grammar had been officially approved by the government, rather than expressing his dissatisfaction in private communications to his supporters and in his diaries. Moreover, we can assume that he advocated following Indian method of *halanta* boycott. He already knew that Nepali mindset was to prove Nepali different from Hindi and other Indian language. Keeping this in mind he could have presented his arguments in a number of different ways which might have attracted many to his views. Furthermore, on the one hand he was fully devoted to his theory but at the same time he was an obedient servant of the Ranas which meant that he never presented his arguments forcefully. He kept silent, followed instructions and wrote his diaries for as long as the Ranas were in power, and he never openly promoted his theory. Only after the Rana regime came to an end, he started propagating his ideas in public and wrote on the topic (Dikṣit 2039 v.s.: 25).³⁰ We can understand that it was now too late; the gap was too long and the Nepali language had already taken a new shape. Despite the circumstances, however, his zeal never faltered, from the beginning till his final words: "I do not desire immortality after death; I would like to be born again and again as a servant of this language. This is my only prayer to the Mother."³¹

³⁰ A *campū* (a mixture of prose and poetry) named *Māṭṛbolīko svān* ("A Vaunting of the Mother Tongue") (2017 v.s.) and a short epic (a poem in 148 stanzas) called *Māṭṛbhāṣā* ("The Mother Tongue") (date unknown).

³¹ "malāi marera amaratva prāpta garnū chaina-varmvar yasai garī janmīrahñ yahī bhāṣā sevī bhaera. mero māṭṛasaṅgako pukār yahī cha" (Dixit 2029 v.s.: 19).

One may conclude that though unsuccessful, Dixit's campaign raised the question of writing system in the Nepali language for the first time. Now, before concluding this article, it is appropriate to briefly review the standardization history of the Nepali language.

Standardization history of Nepali language heretofore

There were several different important campaigns for the advancement and standardization of the Nepali language and literature, campaigns that had originally started in Benares but continue up to the present both in Nepal and India. The very first such campaign in the history of Nepali literature was initiated by *Moti maṇḍalī*, a group established in 1881 in Benares and lead by Motiram Bhatta; it ran a campaign for poetry composition, especially poetic riddles (*samasyā-pūrtis*). The second body, *Rasik samāj* (1906), following the footsteps of *Moti maṇḍalī*, was established in Benares by a circle of Nepali students who published a journal called *Sundarī* for the upliftment of the Nepali literature.

Ram Mani Acharya Dixit is credited with starting the very first discourse on the issue of standardization in the Nepali language. He led the *halanta* boycott campaign in 1908 which was motivated by language reform, launched a journal *Mādhavī* and remained true to his belief of *halanta* boycott throughout his life.

At the initiative of the then Nepali government, Gorkha Bhasha Prakashini Samiti led by Dixit introduced guidelines for students and writers in *Nepalī kasarī śuddha lekhne* ("How to write correct Nepali") in 1935. This specially targeted publications and acted as a guideline for examinations in Nepali in schools and colleges.

Later, in 1956, some young Nepali students³² started *Jharrovadī Āndolan* (Purist Campaign) from Benares, with view of avoiding unnecessary use of Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Arabic and unfamiliar Sanskrit loan words and promoting vocabulary used in Nepal. If need be, they

³² The main protagonists included Taranath Sharma, Chudamani Regmi, Balkrishna Pokhrel, Koshraj Regmi, and Vallabh Mani Dahal, among others.

suggested adopting words by adding Nepali suffixes to them. This purist group also launched a journal, *Naulo pāilo*, to propagate their agenda.

Shiva Raj Acharya started another campaign in Kathmandu in 1968. He argued that Nepali should be written as one pronounces or speaks it. There should not be any artificial grammatical hurdles or rules in the writing system or spelling. He again suggested to use *halanta* if one did not pronounce the inherent ‘a.’ Acharya wrote three books defending his theory: *Jimdo nepālī bhāṣā* (part one, 1973 and part two, 1981, “Living Nepali language”), *Nepālī varṇoccārṇ śikṣā* (1975, “Teaching on Nepali pronunciation”).

In 1984, Nepal Academy (then the Royal Nepal Academy) published *Bṛhat nepālī śabdakoś* (“A Comprehensive Dictionary of Nepali Language”). It acknowledged some new writings systems calling it *Nepālī śiṣṭa paramparā* (“Standard Nepali practice”), according to which, using dental ‘s’ instead of retroflex or palatal ‘s,’ and using short vowel signs instead of long for loan words were some among suggested changes. Contemporary language activist, Sarat Chandra Vasti (Dahal 2019), blames this dictionary for giving optional spellings for the original Sanskrit words, based on the so called standard Nepali practice. This act of the intellectuals of the period intentionally promoted such spellings among students and writers. Furthermore, a new edition of the same dictionary came out in 2001 which then established the previous optional writing system as the standardized one. Modification and reform of Nepali language went so far that *halanta* was reintroduced instead of conjuncts. The promoters of this idea forwarded an argument that using *halanta* instead of conjunct is modern technology friendly and easy for younger children and new learners of the Nepali language. They proposed abandoning seventeen letters from Devanagari alphabets (i.e., palatal and retroflex ‘s,’ retroflex ‘n,’ vowel ‘ṛ’) saying those are not pronounced by the Nepalis.

This extreme change in the writing system shook up Nepali intellectuals. In 2012, the Nepali linguists such as Balkrishna Pokhrel, Taranath Sharma, Mukunda Sharan Upadhyaya, Krishna Prasad Parajulu, together with more than eighty independent Nepali intellectuals joined the new

campaign and stood against this new development of 2001. Some intellectuals who had been involved in the work of the 1984 dictionary compilation committee (i.e., Krishna Prasad Parajuli, Balkrishna Pokhrel) and regretted their previous involvement also took part in the new campaign. This group of united Nepali intellectuals drafted a new guideline, *Nepalī kasarī śuddha lekhne* (“How to write correct Nepali”), in 2012³³ and declared it at an assembly in Kathmandu. The campaign became a success and as a result the Nepal Academy revised its *Bṛhat nepālī śabdakoś* (“A Comprehensive Dictionary of Nepali Language”) in 2018 following the guidelines of 2012.

Thus, we see that the Nepali language reform movement started by Dixit is still an ongoing process among the Nepali intellectuals. Many contemporary literary writers and scholars in Nepal and India are actively involved in it. In Benares, a Nepali reform campaign against excessive use of loan words (other than of Sanskrit or Nepali origin) in Nepali started in 2020 under the leadership of Diwakar Pradhan, seeking authorised approval.

Conclusion

Our focus on Dixit’s first-person narrative of his life and his efforts on behalf of his mother tongue has shown ways in which Dixit was influenced by the Indian independence movement and Hindi language movement; and the extent to which he himself was a linguistic nationalist. We saw how the Indian nationalism, and linguistic nationalism in particular—the deification, embodiment, as well as progress and standardization of the language; launching journals for language reform and progress; publication as a means in promoting the language—guided Dixit to dedicate himself to the service of his mother tongue that was a stand-in for the mother land. We have also become acquainted with the devotee persona of Ram Mani Acharya Dixit as a disciple

³³ The author of this article also signed it.

of the goddess of the language and learned how he added a new image of *bhaṣā bhavānī* to the discourse.

How can we credit Dixit for his contribution to the Nepali language? Or can we do that at all? Though we could see that his *halanta* theory was not taken up nor became critical for the formation of modern standard Nepali, Dixit played crucial role in the background and provided a start to conversation about language reform, specifically via print. He was the very first person to openly announce the linguistic measures in Nepali for the articles to be published in his journal. His *halanta* boycott was for him primarily a means of worshiping *bhaṣā bhavānī* but the history of Nepali language must credit it as a campaign that for the first time in history hosted a discourse on language reform. His efforts in bringing awareness among Nepalis that not only literary expressions, but the linguistic accuracy also plays an important role in making a write-up influential or impressive must also be given credit. We have shown that his initiative in writing a grammar and raising questions on the standardization of the language led to a successive appearance of many grammars. Therefore, one should not limit the understanding of Dixit's *halanta* boycott campaign to a mere effort for reforming the writing system or spelling.

Dixit's life, too, exemplifies how alert Ranas were to the need to control activities they thought politically detrimental both in and outside Nepal. Had they not succeeded in getting Dixit to return to Nepal, we may assume that he would have found many more ways to express his linguistic nationalism, and perhaps better succeeded in getting his views on the Nepali grammar (in particular, the use of *halanta*) accepted, so that Nepali would have taken on a different form than it has today. We can only speculate on how much more he could have contributed beyond what he did if he had been able to remain in Benares for a longer period and worship *bhaṣā bhavānī* the way he wanted. Though circumstances did not favour him he followed his heart and never gave up. As a linguistic nationalist he contributed to the advancement, respect, and standardization of Nepali. He advanced it by getting more books in the language published. He hoped that from a larger pool of works being

read new creative elements would emerge to enrich prose styles. In the end, though Dixit was not immediately successful himself in creating visible change—his efforts nevertheless yielded important developments and triggered conversations about language standardization and linguistic upliftment, the formation of the Gorkha Bhasha Pakashini Samiti and the creation of Nepali grammars.

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Appendix 1

A Short Biographical Sketch of Rammani Acharya Dixit

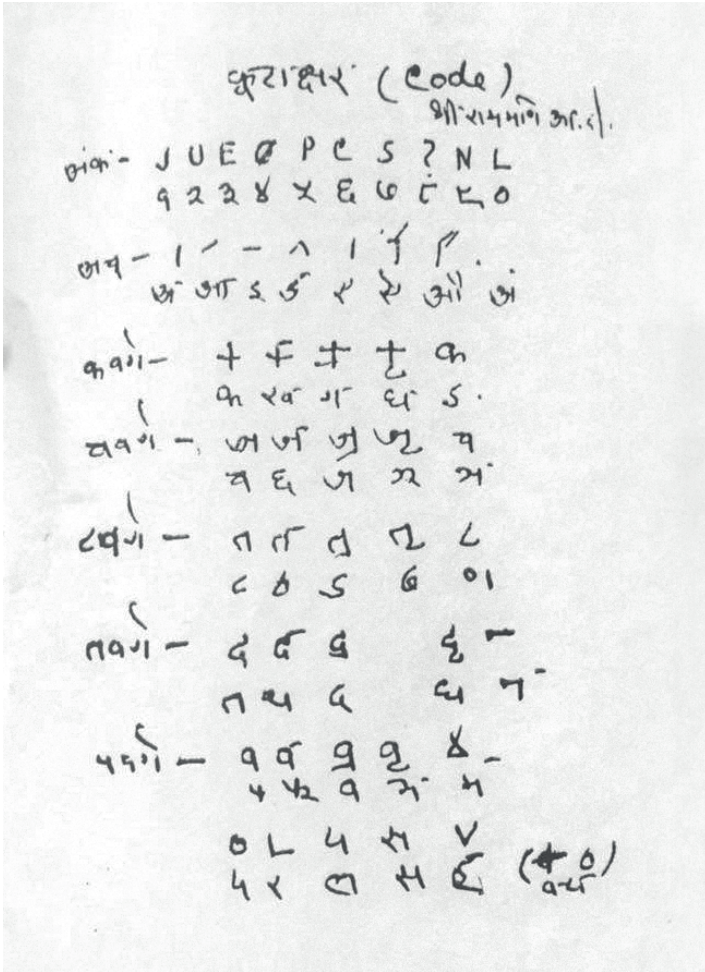
Rammani Acharya Dixit—writer, publisher, language activist and critic—was born in 1883 into an educated Brahmin family. The eldest sibling among six sons and two daughters of Kashinath Acharya and Lalita Devi Acharya Dixit, he grew up in the palace of Bir Shamsher, where his father, who also had a very good relationship with the later prime minister Bhim Shamsher, was in service. After some private Sanskrit tuition at home, he went to Benares for further studies in 1897 and returned to Kathmandu in 1900. He was fluent in Hindi, Nepali, and Sanskrit, conversant in Bengali, Urdu, and English, and also spoke some Marathi and Gujarati. Immediately upon his return he entered Commander-in-Chief Bhim Shamsher's service in December of the same year but after a couple of years fell out of favour with his superior, and so was sent by his family back to Benares in December 1903 to work at the Prabhakari Printing Press, which uncles of his were operating. In the autumn of 1908, after five years there, he was called back to Nepal when Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher learnt of his activities related to the Indian freedom movement and his meeting with activists agitating against the Rana government. While in India, he had launched the literary journal *Madhavi* focused on prose, editing it and writing for it under the name Matri Prasad Adhikari, and successfully published eight issues of it. He had participated in the Nepali language movement in Benares, had started the campaign to boycott the use of the *halanta*, run the family publishing house, campaigned for Nepali to be given official status in education, started collecting entries for a Nepali dictionary (*Maṇikoś*, never published), and travelled long distances in the interest of political, religious, and educational pursuits. Despite the pseudonym, his identity had been uncovered, and he was called back to Nepal because of his unacceptable activities in a foreign land.

Back home in 1909, he took up service to King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah as his personal assistant and developed a close relationship with him. However, Dixit's devotion to Nepali had not ended. In 1914 he

struggled to, and eventually did, establish a government publishing unit, the Gorkha Bhasha Prakashini Samiti (the Gorkha Language Publishing Committee), became its first director and remained in the post for nineteen years. He also became involved in the *Gorkhapatra* (the government's official newspaper) and a legal reform committee. Also in 1914, he entered into service under Prime Minister Chandra Shamsheer and became a dedicated and trusted factotum. He retired from government service in 1951–52 and continued working to promote the Nepali language for the rest of his life. At home he had an extensive library called Shanti Niketan Pustakalaya, established in 1909. Dixit continued writing and editing copiously for the Gorkha Bhasha Prakashini Samiti, covering numerous areas, including Nepali course books, translations of Sanskrit classics into Nepali, and original works on Ayurveda and agriculture. He died in 1972.

Appendix 2

Ram Mani Acharya Dixit's coded script



Source: Ācārya Dīkṣit 2043 v.s.: 143