



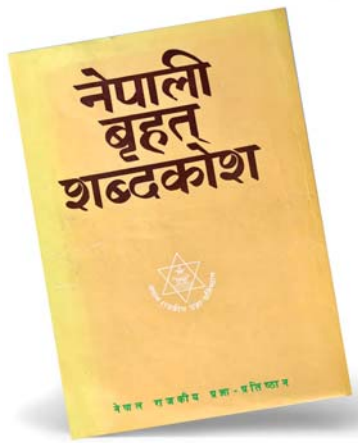
भीममती पड्याङ्ग



Steven Brunswijk

RACE AGAINST TIME

There can be no selective indignation as racism remains tenaciously ubiquitous around the world



George van Driem

The great Nepali linguist वल्लभ मणि दाहाल Ballabh Maṇi Dāhāl was the driving force behind the monumental dictionary नेपाली बृहत् शब्दकोश Nepālī Bṛhat Śabdakoś (pictured, above), the most authoritative edition of which appeared in the year 2040 (1983-84AD). Yet few will remember that this renowned lexicographer spent two years languishing in prison.

He was incarcerated in Phālgun 2017 (February-March 1961) and released from prison two years later on grounds of poor health. Twenty years later, his superb work of lexicography was published. His crime had been to indulge in forbidden love.

His wife too was an eminent scholar, the renowned linguist सुभद्रा सुब्बा Subhadrā Subbā, but he was a Brāhmaṇ and she was a Limbū, or rather a Limbunī.

The caste system is thousands of years old, but after the Gorkhali conquest of the Newa kingdoms in the Kathmandu Valley and the subsequent unification of Nepal, new legislation was needed to regulate the relations between the many castes, ethnic groups and language communities that had been incorporated into the kingdom.

In 1854, Jaṅg Bahādūr Rāṇā promulgated the मुलुकी ऐन Mulukī Ain, an elaborate piece of legislation which regulated in painstaking detail how transgressions against caste would be punished in Nepal. The original manuscript of the law even contained one chapter on same-sex inter-caste pollution in order to sanction cases where two members of the same sex, but not of the same caste, had engaged in amorous activities.

Jaṅg Bahādūr Rāṇā brought back a printing press from Europe in 1851, and the first printed version of the Mulukī Ain was published in the 1890s. The chapter on same-sex pollution was not included in the printed versions of the law because such material was not deemed suitable for a large readership, but Jean Fézas published the omitted chapter of the original manuscript

in the Journal Asiatique in 1983.

The law meticulously detailed numerous punishments, ranging from fines and cruel corporeal punishments to the death penalty for transgressions against caste purity. Each type of inter-caste transgression was weighted differently, and the various fines for smaller transgressions were precisely counted out in rupees and paise.

Quite logically, punishments meted out for inter-caste pollution were far more severe in cases involving a man and a woman than in cases involving two men, and lesbian love lay entirely beyond the purview of the law. Between two amorous men, there was no risk of offspring of mixed genealogy, and the honour of a woman was not besmirched.

The severity of the prescribed punishments was based on which caste was doing what and to whom. Moreover, two members of an inter-caste liaison were not punished with equal severity. Close study of the stipulations of this penal code reveals the labyrinthine thinking inherent to the racist psychology of caste in fascinating detail.

Laws have changed, but changing attitudes takes time.

Fortunately for us, Ballabh Maṇi Dāhāl did not languish in prison forever but went on to produce the Nepali lexicography. Meanwhile, attitudes have changed, and increasing numbers of people have begun to embrace inter-caste unions with a passion. Yet ethnic stereotypes are deeply embedded in our psyche, and attitudes change only gradually.

In 2000, I was warming myself in the sun, sitting on the broad

staircase of the house of a well-to-do Nuvākoṭī Brahmin family. An auntie at the top of the stairs called out to the family on the ground floor to shoo me off of the stairway and to have them sweep the stairs.

It was all very well that her nephew had brought home a म्लेच्छ Mlecch, but she needed to be able to descend the stairs of her own house without having her caste purity being polluted by an untouchable कुइरे kuire. Needless to say, she deeply disapproved of my friendship with her nephew, who later accompanied me to Europe and settled in Amsterdam and who now, for all intents and purposes, is very much a Dutchman.

Immigration and naturalisation in the opposite direction are impossible. In stark contrast to the openness of western Europe, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, xenophobic legislation in Nepal enforces an ethnic bias that seals off Nepali society for immigration.

Even with the written approval of His Majesty King Birendra, it took Lt Col John Philip Cross (below) 32 years, 6 months and 2 days before he was granted citizenship. When his struggle was finally rewarded, the legendary Gurkha figure was already deep into his retirement. Yet he is the lucky exception. This grudging attitude with respect to Nepali citizenship reflects a mind-set firmly rooted in the racial attitudes of the Mulukī Ain.

People pay for their phenotype in Nepal and India. People who look like Nepalis or Indians can freely enter Bhaktapur or stroll around Kathmandu's historical centre. European citizens of South Asian extraction and even certain

friends of mine from Hong Kong and Thailand are not charged because the criterion is a purely racial one. Imagine the public outcry if only people of European ancestry were allowed to freely stroll around the centre of Paris without being charged. Imagine the hue and cry if people who were judged not to 'look European' were charged more to ascend the Eiffel Tower.

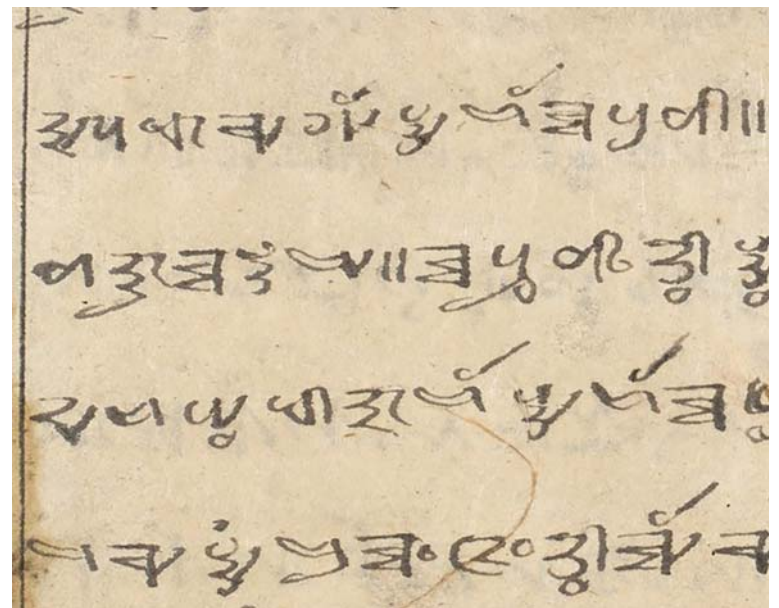
Subaltern views are legitimate perspectives, too.

In the 1980s, any friendship of mine with a Brahmin or Chetri was viewed with undisguised suspicion by the loving Limbu family with whom I lived in Limbuwan. In fact, I was carefully guarded against consorting too closely with any members of the पानी चल्ने जात pānī calne jāt or 'water-pure castes' of the Mulukī Ain, to whom the Limbu refer colloquially by the unflattering term च्चु च्चु च्चु? cwa?/kelakpa 'water lickers'.

I should address him as तिमी timī, he insisted, whilst he addressed me as हजुर hajur and तपाईं tapāi. In Nepali, pronominal usage has begun to change slowly, but such changes should be allowed to evolve naturally and not be forced by meddlesome politicians or language activists. The intricacies and the sheer beauty of the Nepali pronominal system is a topic on which I published a study in 2019.

Kamala Harris is not Black. She is a human being.

In molecular genetic terms, we have understood for over half a century that distinct 'races' as separate subspecies of humankind are a fiction. We are all members of one large human family. The relationship between genes, their phenotypical expression and their pleiotropic interplay is inordinately complex, and our individual differences often tend to be larger than the differences between groups and populations. Moreover, we



The Directorate of Education in Gangtok has been producing Limbu schoolbooks since the 1970s, but in eastern Nepal in the 1980s families lucky enough to have retained deteriorating old Limbu manuscripts guarded these precious heirlooms in secrecy. For over a century the possession of books in Limbu script had been a capital offence in the kingdom.

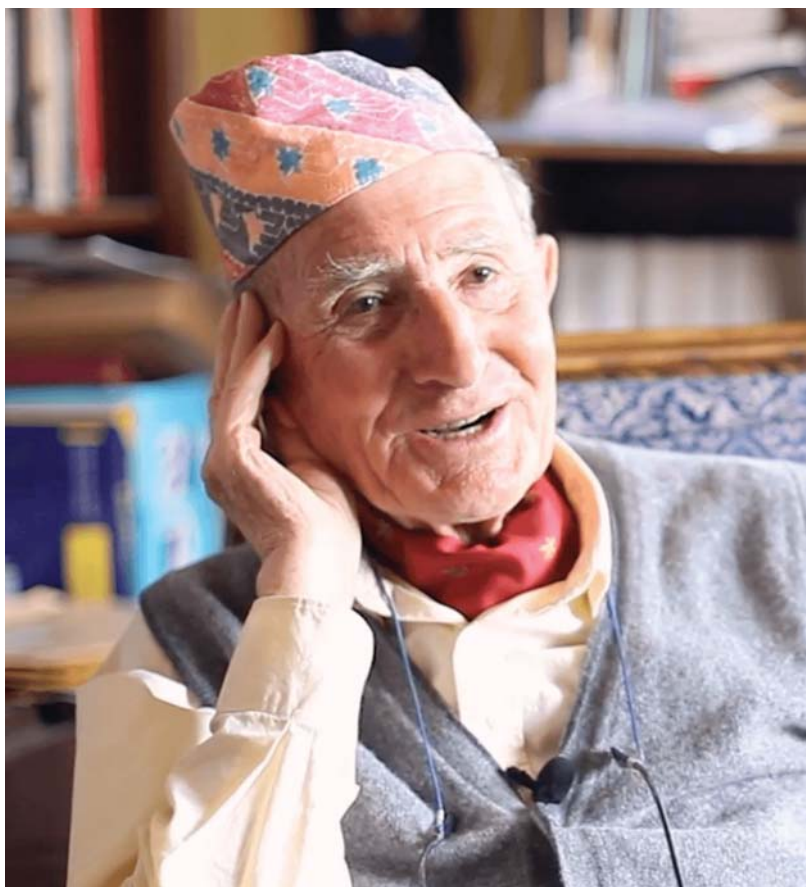
The only completely intact old Limbu books from eastern Nepal were rescued by Brian Houghton Hodgson, to whom these texts had discretely been entrusted. The manuscripts are now safely stored out of harm's way in the British Library in London.

In 1983, a low-caste man in rural eastern Nepal who was twice my age took the trouble to explain to me that it was grammatically incorrect for me to address him as तपाईं tapāi. He asserted that only a foreigner could make such a mistake. Nepalis of high caste would, he insisted, never commit the error of using the deferential pronoun तपाईं tapāi to address someone of his low artisanal caste.

each embody the highly individual coalescence of numerous distinct strands of ancestral lineages. Nobody has just one ancestry. We each have countless ancestries.

Kamala Harris is not Black. She is a human being. More specifically, Kamala Harris is not a negress. Her father appears to be a mulatto (French mulâtre or cāpre) or perhaps a quadroon (Portuguese and French quarteron). Her mother was Tamil. So, she could be described as half-caste, but all such words are nowadays considered taboo by the squeamish, who wrongly think that any such label can diminish our humanity. Besides, there exists a more precise term. The English word used in the Caribbean for an Indian and African métissage is dougla, sometimes written doogala. The term ultimately derives from Hindi दोगला dogalā 'half-breed'. In the caste-ridden society of the Indian subcontinent, the term implicitly used to carry the unpleasant connotation of 'bastard'.

In the Caribbean context, however, the word dougla has lost



Lt Col John Philip Cross



US Vice President Kamala Harris. Her parents (right).



much of its pejorative connotation and is pronounced with the vowel sound in the first syllable instead of the vowel sound. The Caribbean pronunciation may represent a retention because etymologically the Hindi form derives from दु-दु- [~ दो do] 'two' and कुल kul 'race, kin, ancestry'. In the French Caribbean, the offspring of an Indian and African métissage is termed 'un batazendien' or, in the case of a female, 'une batazendienne'. A Caribbean French synonym is chapé-coolie.

As a counterpart to the word quarteron 'quadroon', Caribbean French also has the term griffe for a person with three grandparents of African ancestry and one grandparent of European ancestry. The French Caribbean term mamelouque or octavon denotes a person with a single great-grandparent of African ancestry, whereas the term chabin denotes a person of mixed Caribbean colonial ancestry with fair skin, light eyes and light crinkly hair. Instead of placing such words under taboo, these labels can all be lovingly worn with pride. Douglā too can be proudly worn as the badge of a diverse heritage.

Such traditional terms are not only more specific than the new construct 'black', but also less misleading. Barack Obama is described as the first 'Black' president of the United States, but in view of his parentage he is no less of a 'white' man. The historically relatively novel and entirely artificial social construct 'black' fails to reflect any such sense of balance and ends up being no more informative than the label विमहा ष्ठिमहā.

As a politician, Kamala Harris will naturally be professionally inclined to posture in whatever way may strike her as most expedient at the moment. Yet, whichever way she chooses to identify herself in terms of her Asian, African and European ancestry, she did not change her name, as someone joked in Nepal's social web after the 2020 election, from कमला हरिस् to कमला ष्ठित्स् ।

Gay shows the way

In the summer of 1973, I was on a foray across the North Sea to buy English books. Strolling down Charing Cross Road, an arresting image caught my eye. A wall poster featured a side view of the naked muscular torso of a young South Asian man in a bandana flexing the biceps of his left arm whilst looking down defiantly upon the viewer. The caption, in italicised pink capitals, shouted out *PAKI POOF*. I stood still, horrified. My father, walking on ahead towards Foyles, called back to me telling me not to tarry, but I was mesmerised. Was this some racist provocation inciting a pogrom against homosexuals?

Closer inspection of the fine print on the poster revealed the scant details of a one-off dance

event. This bit of news shocked me as much as had the loud caption. Few at that time could have foreseen the fortnightly South Asian gay disco nights of Club Kali near Tufnell Park, which would only begin to be held over two decades later, in 1995.

What puzzled me most was the aggressive use of the derogatory terms 'Paki' and 'poofster'. This was four years after Stonewall, and I was not alone in not having cottoned on to the pivotal change in the politics of usage that had been catalysed by the events of June 1969.

Gay people defiantly began to embrace once scathing terms such as 'gay' and 'queer' and began to wear them as badges of pride. At the time, I was equally disturbed in Holland to hear young men speaking of themselves or their friends as *nichten* in Dutch, or as *janetten* in Flemish. How could people joke light-heartedly about such a hurtful word as *mietje*, which combined the acerbic flavour of *sissy* and *faggot*?

The brandishing of such threatening terms as labels of self-identification baffled and disturbed me. What I failed to understand at the time was that the seizing of ownership of such terms by the gay community embodied the linguistic counterpart of coming out.

Half a century later, this strategic appropriation of usage has proven to be highly successful, even if this process was initially not painless. The bold gay strategy of linguistic defiance can now serve as an instructive example.

Race has yet to come out of the closet.

The politics of 'race' has seen precious few parallel developments. Instead, by sanitising their language with euphemisms, people unwittingly admit to being ashamed of their own or someone else's ancestry. We say *Viśvakarma* instead of *kāmi*, and in the United States people say Afro-American instead of *negro*. Yet being bashful about biology, instead of being bold and brave, can backfire.

In 1932, Mohandās Gāndhī introduced the euphemism Harijan 'children of God' to refer to members of traditionally untouchable castes, but, because attitudes did not change, this label too became a derogatory term. In 1982, the Union government in India was compelled to instruct state governments to refrain from using the term Harijan to refer to Dalits 'the downtrodden', another euphemism.

The gypsies of Europe proudly retained the old word *डॉम* *doma* as their self-designation, Roma or Rroma, but now these people are often being obliquely referred to as 'travellers'.

French linguist Nicolas

Tournadre calls this phenomenon *aseptisation linguistique* 'linguistic disinfection'. He describes how French went from calling swarthy people of sub-Saharan extraction *nègres* to calling them *noirs* to calling them *blacks* in an inflationary spiral of apologetic avoidance. Using *noir* as an excuse for *nègre* acts as an enabler for racist attitudes. Once *noir* itself becomes derogatory, a new excuse had to be found by adopting the Anglo-American term, which takes us to where the cowardly politics of avoidance began in the first place.

The invention of the construct *black* misapprehends that we are in no way 'contaminated' by our biological heritage. There is nothing about us that requires disinfection.

The unenlightened insist on linguistic disinfection.

Russian *negr*, Spanish *negro* and Dutch *neger* have remained relatively neutral terms. Yet in the misguided belief that all American trends must be slavishly imitated, Dutch language activists have recently sought to foist fastidious Anglo-American norms of speech onto the Dutch language. They insist that the Dutch word *neger* likewise be rendered taboo.

Steven Brunswijk became a national celebrity in the Netherlands under the name *Braboneger* 'Brabantian negro'. Brabant is a province in the south, and this prominent media personality speaks his native Dutch with an unmistakable sappig 'juicy' Brabantian accent.

Brunswijk has publicly defied language activists, asserting rightly that there has never been anything wrong with being a *neger* 'negro'. Brunswijk pokes fun at stereotypes and shows that being a negro is a heritage of which to be proud. Indeed, every person can be proud of his or her own unique way of being human.

In their fervour to follow North American fashions, Dutch language activists have been at pains to convince us that there is something racist about the Dutch term *blank*, which simply denotes a person of European ancestry. These intellectual fashion victims insist that instead Dutchmen should now use the adjective *wit* 'white', just like the Americans do, to convey precisely the same meaning that *blank* has always denoted in Dutch.

Not only is this language game of musical chairs a perfect exercise in futility, moreover for Dutch speakers of my generation to call a living person *wit* conjures up the image of a *Pierrot*. In the Dutch sense of the word, people are never *wit*. Even albinos have more colour. Making harmless

words taboo imbues them with a destructive power which they previously lacked. Instead, using existing labels boldly, with pride and with equal respect for all, renders them anodyne.

The cowardly politics of insisting on contrived vocabulary does not contribute to changing attitudes. It is the intent with which we say a word that determines its illocutionary force. This linguistic insight has always been understood by Brunswijk, but not by the intolerant and linguistically ignorant busybodies who have outshouted him in the Dutch media and who have sought to cow him into abandoning his famous epithet.



Pierrot

A few felicitous examples show that the politics of unapologetic usage, boldly employed by the gay community, can be applied just as successfully in speaking about biological ancestry.

Being Indo is the way to go.

Analogous to the British term 'Anglo-Indian' in the Indian subcontinent, the Dutch colonial term for people of mixed European and Asian ancestry in the Dutch East Indies was the euphemistic coinage Indo-European. Dutch colonial attitudes about race being what they used to be, this coinage was quickly colloquially contracted to the pejorative *Indo*.

Meanwhile, in the world of linguistics, the Dutch name for the Indo-European language family, *Indogermaans*, was replaced by the more international term *Indo-Europees*, a move which effectively forced out the original Dutch term *Indo-European* in its colonial meaning and replaced the Dutch East Indian sense of the word with the linguistic image of a speaker of ancient Indo-European.

At roughly the same time that I was shocked by the poster on the streets of London, people of mixed Dutch East Indian colonial ancestry began to seize ownership of the derogatory term *Indo* and to wear this label as a badge of pride. Consequently, the label is no

longer deprecatory, and today *Indos* celebrate their dual ancestry, which harmoniously unites colonised Asians and European colonisers, as a synthesis which historically produced its own marvellous culinary culture and the creole tongue *petjok*.

In Sri Lanka, all the Burghers whom I have met similarly take pride in their dual ancestry, and in Namibia the Basters of Rehoboth likewise sport their ethnic label with exemplary pride.

Sticks and stones.

The brutal beating of Rodney King in 1992 and the murder of George Floyd by policemen in 2020 are just two incidents that

the media have highlighted out of a vast sea of racial injustices perpetrated against people of colour in the United States. A sincere moral stand against racism must condemn with equal vehemence racist injustices in North America, the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated against untouchables and minorities in the Subcontinent, the racially motivated murder of farmer families of European ancestry in hundreds of brutal, systematically planned farm massacres known as *plaasmoorde* in South Africa, the incarceration, torture and disappearance of Uighurs in the Xinjiang Uighur

Autonomous Region, dozens of deaths of aboriginal Australians in police custody in past decades and, indeed, all acts of aggression and injustice against people based on their biological ancestry. We are all one and the same human race, but racism remains tenaciously ubiquitous, and there can be no place for selective indignation.

The trap of 'linguistic disinfection' sets into motion a doomed cycle of squeamish avoidance and unnecessary apology that does nothing to change real attitudes in society. Instead, it is time to bring back good words like *negro*, *kāmi*, *quadroon*, *sārki*, *douglā* and to take proud ownership of these labels and to don them as badges of pride.

How can we demand respect for our ancestry if we render our ethnic affinity taboo and make excuses for our biological heritage by hiding behind epithets like 'harijan' or 'black'? It is time to come out of the closet and demand respect. Instead of hiding behind euphemisms, it is time to bring tabooed good words back into usage and to take proud ownership of this rich vocabulary for all the beautiful varieties of humankind. 🇨🇪

Prof Dr George van Driem holds the chair for Historical Linguistics at the University of Bern in Switzerland and has for half a century nurtured an abiding love for Nepal.