

[Enchanting Sanskrit](#)

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HERITAGE

Enchanting Sanskrit

Scholars, priests, villages, young and old are part of an all-India movement to revive our sacred language

CHOODIE SHIVARAM, BANGALORE

Soothing tones of sanskrit waft through the air as you walk past the spacious two-storied school in the interiors of Bangalore's Girinagar. Enter the building and it reverberates with the rich traditions of this land. You are at Aksharam, the organization that teaches spoken Sanskrit in ten days! People thus initiated are all set to commence their wonderful journey in the world of Sanskrit. Aksharam is an offshoot of Samskrita Bharathi, a voluntary organization devoted to the revival of Sanskrit (www.sanskrita-bharati.org/). It seeks to restore Sanskrit to daily life in India and re-establish it as a common man's language.

At Aksharam, everyone, including toddlers, converse in the ancient language. You speak to the little ones in English or Kannada, and precisely comes the reply in Sanskrit. I was unable to converse in Sanskrit, despite some study of the language. Honestly, the little children gave me a complex. Unlike at other homes, parents here translate the English

rhymes children learn at school into Sanskrit. These children in turn are able to teach Sanskrit to their teachers and friends! Sanskrit sounds so pure and divine as it emanates from the innocent mouths of little children. It's a unique experience.

When I called Aksharam at ten one night, I was surprised to hear the solemn chanting of slokas in the background. Even at this late hour, the senior research students were learning the nuances of spiritual Sanskrit from Guru Vishwas. He told me, "Sanskrit is the most ancient, highly developed, literature-rich language. It is a treasure house of ancient Indian wisdom. It is certainly the vehicle of our culture and key to the heritage of this great civilization. Speaking the language not only helps in learning, but also gives the students pride in their civilizational values. Speaking this language generates energy."

Why do people think Sanskrit is difficult to learn? "The answer is simple. They don't follow the natural way. The first step in learning any language is to converse in it, because speaking and listening to a language takes you closer to it," explained Vishwas. He has been conducting the ten-day speak Sanskrit courses in India and abroad and is the chief editor of the Sanskrit monthly Sambhasana Sandesha, which is published by Aksharam.

Speak Sanskrit Movement

The decline of Sanskrit in moderntimes worried people like Sri Krishna Sastry. He knew the wealth of knowledge we were losing by forgetting the language. He proposed,

"Let service to Sanskrit not stop at worshipping with the language; everyone should be able to speak the language. Conversational Sanskrit has to be taught and popularized." In 1981 Sri Krishna Sastry, with a group of like-minded friends at Tirupati Sanskrit College, founded Samskrita Bharathi and evolved the "Speak Sanskrit Movement."

They launched the movement through the Sanskrit unit of Hindu Seva Prathisthana. Organisations like Bharath Samskrita Parishad, the Sanskrit unit of Vidhya Bharathi, Vishwa Samskrita Prathisthanam and Swaadhyaya Mandalam contributed to accelerating the propagation of Sanskrit. To keep pace with the rapid growth of the movement, a centralized institute of Samskrita Bharathi was formed at New Delhi in 1995. Aksharam in Bangalore became its international center.

"Our mission is to engender a cultural renaissance of India by bringing Sanskrit back to the mainstream, to propagate the great scientific truths hidden in our ancient scriptures, attain social harmony by removing barriers of caste, creed and race, and achieve national integration through Sanskrit," Sri Krishna Sastry told me.

In 15 years, Samskrita Bharathi reached impressive

heights through its sevavratis (Sanskrit missionaries), who relentlessly work towards resuscitating the language. Now more than two million people around the world can speak simple Sanskrit. Nearly four million people have learned Sanskrit through correspondence, and 25,000 teachers have been trained to conduct spoken Sanskrit workshops.

As a result of their efforts and the efforts of many others, 30 million students in India are studying Sanskrit. There are 1,500 mahapatashalas (Sanskrit colleges), with 100,000 students, and 3,500 patashalas (primary and secondary schools), where students learn Sanskrit in its traditional form. Premier scientific and technical institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, have introduced the study of Sanskrit.

The Centre for Development of Advanced Computing, C-DAC, has been conducting research on Sanskrit and computers. Sanskrit is also taught in about 250 universities in 40 countries. Over 400 universities promote Sanskrit Studies and Research. India has ten Sanskrit universities and 250 institutions involved in Sanskrit research. Eighty Sanskrit journals are circulated in the country.

Among the most unusual results of the Speak Sanskrit Movement are the two villages of Mathoor and Hosahalli in Karnataka. The movement adopted them as a means to promote spoken Sanskrit, and today everyone in them—from the menial laborer to the merchant, to the brahmins—speaks Sanskrit with élan. These two villages are known throughout the country. More recently, Samskrita Bharathi has succeeded in teaching conversational Sanskrit to the entire tribal village of Mohaka, near Jabalpur.

Sanskrit's checkered history

Yes, Sanskrit is regaining its lost grandeur in India, but how did it ever get relegated to such a low position in the first place? Sanskrit was the lingua franca of India before the country was invaded by aliens. It was the medium of administration, commerce, trade and education. Cultural, religious and intellectual transactions were in Sanskrit. Then in 1835, Lord Macaulay produced his "Minute of Indian Education" in which he stated, "What we spend on the Sanskrit colleges is not merely a dead loss to the cause of truth; it is bounty money paid to raise up champions of error [that is, Sanskrit scholars]." He said Sanskrit literature is, "barren of useful knowledge" with "the most serious errors

on the most important subjects." His recommendation, adopted by the British administration, was to no longer fund any Sanskrit education, save the Sanskrit college at Banaras.

The knowledge and use of Sanskrit became limited to the priestly class and a small number of pundits who used it for religious practices.

"Thanks to that priestly class, the language was preserved. They must be given credit that their continued use of Sanskrit helped its survival," avers Shri Shivamurthy Swamiji, pontiff of Tarabalu Math in Bangalore.

"After independence, the Kothari commission sacrificed Sanskrit by not including it in the three-language formula," states Sri Krishna Sastry. He is referring to the system whereby students would learn English, their regional language and Hindi. Those already in Hindi-speaking areas would learn another Indian or European language. "Compelled by political and economic pressures and fascination for the West," he went on, "India continued learning foreign languages, especially English. The

elimination of Sanskrit for the majority of Indians resulted in the loss of the rich traditional knowledge. Macaulay killed the ancient traditional education system of India. It created a land in which we do not inherit our traditional knowledge," said Sri Krishna Sastry.

Dr. Ashok Aklujkar of British Columbia, Canada, concurs. "I am strongly in favor of the Speak Sanskrit Movement," he told Hinduism Today. "However, it and other similar movements will have only band-aid successes until Hindus realize that they have to have a long-term, comprehensive vision for their way of living and plan how to bring about the desired changes in 50 or 100 years. The Indian education system needs to change from the present three-language formula to one which teaches the regional language, the classical language (e.g., Sanskrit) and an international language (e.g., English)." Aklujkar (aklujkar@interchange.ubc.ca) is author of an innovative course, Sanskrit: an Easy Introduction to an Enchanting Language.

Sanskrit, however, was not a pariah in Europe and

America, where its status as one of the most ancient Indo-European languages was appreciated by Western academics and promoted by Indian scholars in the West such as Aklujkar. Thus Indian students studying in the West have found a more positive treatment of Sanskrit than they can in India. Dr. Kamat, an educator, told me, "Our traditional knowledge systems flourish in the West because they are looking towards India for wisdom. The Indian student, once abroad and out of the claustrophobic clutches of Indian environs, starts looking for his roots. That's how Indians abroad take to study of our traditional systems and Sanskrit. There is a paradigm shift in their thinking."

When I attended the Tenth World Sanskrit Conference, held in 1997 in Bangalore, I found a number of non-Indians who presented papers on complex topics such as grammar, medical literature and navigational terms. I met an Australian professor who was an authority on Vishnu Purana, a topic unknown to many Hindus.

Dr. Garry A. Tubb, a professor from Columbia

University and former professor at Harvard University, who was at that conference, expressed regret that there is no systematic Sanskrit education in India. "Indians should develop love and respect for their ancient culture and rich heritage. If they neglect the ancient manuscripts, the rich, millennia-old knowledge will perish," he predicted. Dr. Tubb has written a critique on Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhavam* as well as a guide to Sanskrit teaching for Western students. Dr. Rahul Peter Das of Martin Luther University in Germany believes that "studying Sanskrit will help students understand mathematics better." Dr. Das has studied the Vedas from their original texts and is an authority on Sanskrit grammar.

Dr. Robert Goldman, head of the Sanskrit department at Philadelphia University, says, "Learning Sanskrit and its grammar will help one easily understand world civilization and literature." Dr. Goldman, who has traveled extensively in India, can recite the Vedas,

Upanishads and mantras and speak fluently in Sanskrit. He has also translated the original Valmiki Ramayana into English.

Better teaching methods

Another factor that contributed greatly to the neglect and "death" of Sanskrit was the treatment it received at the hands of academics. "Nowhere will you find a language being taught in a foreign language," says Sri Krishna Sastry. The easiest and most effective way is the conversational method. Ironically, Sanskrit was being taught through English and in textbook fashion. As a result, students, instead of learning the language and developing affinity, moved away from it.

For seven years through high school and college I studied Sanskrit through English and yet I do not know the language. Many like me

took Sanskrit as an optional language because obtaining marks was easy. Without studying grammar, which accounted for thirty marks, we would answer in English or Kannada for the remaining 70 marks and still score well. Why did we need to know the language when the focus was on the marks? The need to understand the nuances of Sanskrit was not emphasized. My children have been studying Sanskrit from class five and are quite good at it—they know the language. The teaching methods have been wholesome, with complete focus on the language, including conversation.

The teachers have improved along with the method. "Sanskrit teachers today are driven by the promote Sanskrit movement and have a passion for the language. They are no longer seen as tuft-growing men in dhotis," opines Mr. Uday Narayan, a teacher. Decades ago Sanskrit teachers were looked down upon as "pundits." They did not fit into the

fashionable English school environs. Today, an increasing number of educators feel that teaching Sanskrit in schools will open up the treasure house of traditional knowledge and wisdom to children.

Sanskrit versus science

Knowledge of Sanskrit is imperative for understanding ayurveda, the ancient Indian medical science, not to mention architecture, statecraft and the many other subjects dealt with in the Sanskrit literature.

The attempts to bring these ancient sciences into prominence in modern India are not without difficulties. Take ayurveda as an example. It used to be that ayurveda students knew Sanskrit. However, in an apparent attempt to upgrade the status of ayurveda, the Central Council for Alternative

Systems of Indian Medicine, which administers and manages ayurvedic colleges across India, made a new rule. They said only students with modern science as majors would be admitted to ayurvedic courses. At the same time, the Central Board for Secondary Education made Sanskrit an optional subject up to class 12 for students of science.

As a result, students with a science background who study ayurveda at the college level haven't learned Sanskrit, resist studying it and insist upon using translated texts. Sanskrit, which was compulsory for all the five years during the ayurveda course, was reduced to only one year of study. Now science students are protesting even this one year of Sanskrit study.

The communal issue

Sanskrit still draws resistance from certain castes, especially the economically weaker sections and backward classes. They feel the language is difficult to pronounce and believe it is only for the upper castes, not for them. "The problem of our Dalit brethren is not just economic disparity but also cultural disparity. Providing knowledge of Sanskrit gives them this cultural equality and brings social harmony. But the most important factor is how the language is taught and how the teacher motivates," says Krishna Sastry. It is worth noting that great Sanskrit works were written by non-brahmins, such as Vyasa, son of a fisherwoman and editor of the Mahabharatha; Valmiki, son of a hunter and author of Ramayana; Kalidas, a shepherd and poet; and Jabala, an outcaste and author of the Jabala Upanishad.

Still, Sanskrit was branded a brahminical language and tainted "communal," contrary to its true nature. "Sanskrit is the only

language that has a secular policy. See the Bhagavad Gita. It gives a global or universal message. It does not say worship one God alone. This is not so in scriptures of other faiths. India's secular nature is because of the Sanskrit culture, which is the very culture of this land," states Sri Krishna Sastry. "The secular policy practiced by our politicians and so-called secularists has done everything to keep the language out."

Courts rescue the language

The central government wanted Sanskrit to be removed from the higher secondary syllabus, arguing that by allowing Sanskrit, other classical languages [Pali, for example] must be included, and citing the secular policy of the government. In 1994, the Supreme Court came to the rescue, noting the importance of Sanskrit for nurturing our cultural heritage as a nation.

Similarly, in 1994, the Madras High Court held that "Sanskrit is not a dead language," and observed that the reasoning of the Tamil Nadu Government that Sanskrit had ceased to be a language in use "is nothing but ignorance of reality." Justice S. S. Subramani referred to a Supreme Court decision which said Sanskrit is the mother of all Indo-Aryan languages, and it was this language in which our Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads had been written, and in which Kalidas, Bhavbuti, Banabhatta and Dandi wrote their classics. The judge also said that the teachings of Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Madhvacharya, Nimbarka and Vallabhacharya would not have been woven into the fabric of Indian culture if Sanskrit had not have been available to them as a medium of expressing their thoughts. Dr. Karan Singh, son of the last Maharaja of Kashmir and a prominent Indian statesman, said, "The ancient language has kept our samskriti (culture) alive. We are India as it is today because of Sanskrit."

In 1990, bharata natyam exponent and long-time Delhi resident Justin McCarthy made an impassioned plea for Sanskrit in the Indian Express. He wrote, "Sanskrit is not dead, nor is it merely a language. It is a science and art, and insofar as it is a compendium of a people's consciousness, it is a microcosm of all that is essentially Indian. It is more precise and profound than any of the world's tongues. In literary terms, the expressive power of Sanskrit is unparalleled in multi-dimensional subtlety. My desperate plea for the preservation of Sanskrit may seem to many to be unwarranted. But India's identity as unique amongst the world's nations is at stake. What is that uniqueness? This is a country whose citizens are living descendants of a vibrant past, a tradition which still colors the lives of most Indians today. It is a tradition which, in its ideal state, affords a fertile, holistic approach to living even in the hyped-up, commercial age, inspiring all those, both Indian and foreign, who are at all touched by it."