

[Smitten by Sanskrit](#)

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YOUTH

Smitten by Sanskrit

USA sisters eschew lesser teenage pursuits in favor of India's most sacred language

Two hours before sunrise, when most houses lie slumbering, lights turn on in the Sparks, Nevada, home of Andrea Devi Forman and her sister, Sara Anjuli. A small fire is kindled on the porch, fed by clarified butter. Sanskrit chanting lilts through the air. Their family is performing a yajñā, Vedic fire ceremony--at 4am in the morning!

Performing pre-dawn yajñās is just one way that Andrea, 18, and Sara, 15, are not your typical, party-all-weekend teens. They find better channels for youthful energies, and their unconventional hobby of Sanskrit scholarship is turning heads. "My husband, Robert, and I are long-time students of the Vedas," affirms Linda, their mother. "While pregnant with Andrea, I read the Rig Veda's 9th and 10th mandalas out loud."

"After Andrea was born," Linda continues, "we were in a store here in Reno and saw an Indian family. They were staring at us. Knowing how much Indians love babies, I assumed they were entranced with our beautiful girl. Suddenly, they approached us. The father held out his arms and said, 'Please?'"

I hesitated, and he plucked Andrea from my arms. 'It is all right, yes?' he asked. 'We must bless this beautiful child for you.' He chanted Sanskrit and applied red powder to her forehead. 'She is very special, yes?' he asked. He thanked me for allowing him to bless her, placed her back in my arms, smiled and left the store."

Andrea recalls when age nine, she "heard pujas and yajñas from Dr. Vasant Lad and various swamis. I was excited and thought, 'I have to learn Sanskrit.'" Two years later at summer's edge, Andrea was perusing ayurvedic books and asked her mother why she did not want to read them in their original form. She pointed to the Devanagari--Sanskrit script--and said, "Mom, you should just read this. It's easy." Toward summer's end, Linda found numerous pages under Andrea's bed of what appeared to be a Sanskrit and English dictionary. Andrea had matched Devanagari letters from of the glossary of an English translation of the Rig Veda, and formed the whole Sanskrit alphabet! One year later a professor reviewed Andrea's makeshift "dictionary," amazed to find it 95 percent accurate.

Andrea began chanting Sanskrit and listening to tapes by the ayurvedic doctor, Vasant Lad. "Obsessed with Sanskrit," would not be overstating her enthusiasm. "It became my focus," she recalls. Soon, she could effortlessly chant slokas from memory and translate them into English. "The heart of the universe is in Sanskrit," chirps Andrea. "I study Hindu scriptures. My favorite Veda is the Rig. It's so cool. The Rig Veda chants are intense. They follow a specific meter and melody. You can physically feel the effect. My second favorite is the Yajur Veda --more melodious, still intense, but not like the Rig."

There was one problem. Whenever Andrea heard Sanskrit chanting, there were multiple voices. She wanted a companion, too. And her gaze fell on her younger sister. Sara became Andrea's chanting partner. While not as interested as Andrea in the mechanics of the language, Sara had an uncanny ability to read and chant from the Devanagiri script almost immediately after seeing a page.

The kids' chanting increased exponentially. Sanskrit now reverberates through their home on weekends and even during the week after school. Teachers at public school pull them out of class to chant for other students. Andrea recounts, "When I first get up in front of a class and start talking, some kids are snotty to me, rolling their eyes as if bored. But when I start chanting, the room gets silent, and you can feel the negativity lift; then everyone is saying 'Do more! Talk more to us!'" Teachers have even called Linda to ask what she has done to make the girls "so different" from other kids.

A growing reputation is testified to by the girls' recent performance for Ram Karan Sharma, India's elite Sanskrit scholar at California's Berkeley University, and at the Vedic Astrology Conference in San Diego. While their skills are formidable, they are not yet exposed to the ritual chanting of temple priests--a class of its own. Rating accuracy, Andrea says, "We did not grow up in a Vedic society. I've never been to a temple. I didn't start from as early an age as Indian pundits." She is hopeful to soon be immersed in temples during a planned trip to India. Robert has recorded a CD of the girls. It has music with a pop/New Age slant, besides traditional scriptural pieces like the Shanti Mantra. Andrea says the reason for using Western music is to expose more people to

Sanskrit.

Asked whether the family considers itself Hindu, Linda said, "I suspect our deep interest in the Vedas, plus our home being filled with pictures and statues of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and our devotion to them, surely indicates where our hearts lie!"

With Linda Forman in Sparks, Nevada
The Forman Family, 965 Lydia Court, Sparks, Nevada, USA
89436, Web: www.ShantiSanskrit.com, E-mail:
info@ShantiSanskrit.com