

## TROUGHS AND CRESTS IN THE JOURNEY OF SANSKRIT

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### Abstract

*Sanskrit, one of the oldest languages of the world and the mother of many regional and vernacular languages has always shone in different times. If in ancient and medieval time, Sanskrit was majorly known for its varied and rich literature, then in modern times it is well embraced for its Sanskritic values. The article takes us through the journey of Sanskrit from ancient to medieval to modern time and the current state of Sanskrit in India today.*

### TROUGHS AND CRESTS IN THE JOURNEY OF SANSKRIT

Ancient India indeed left an indelible impact on the formation and development of Sanskrit. The society owes immensely to the great grammarian Panini who set the rules of language that was then used in expressing scientific ideas. Sanskrit Literature is divided into two parts- Vedic Sanskrit and Non-Vedic Sanskrit.

1. Vedic Sanskrit: It is also referred as Oral Sanskrit and Vedas are expressed in this Sanskrit. Written around 1500-1000 B.C., Vedas are considered the most ancient works of not only India but also of the world.
2. Non-Vedic Sanskrit: It is popularly called as Classical Sanskrit Literature or Paninian Sanskrit. Great epics were written in this Sanskrit. Epics are divided into two. One, natural epics that are derived from old stories. The oldest and most representative natural epic is Mahabharata. The second kind of epics is artificial epics called Kavyas. Ramayana belongs to this school.

Paninian Sanskrit also boasts of producing monumental works of Kalidasa. Shakuntala was his most illustrious drama. Other highly celebrated dramatists were Bhasa, Harsa and Bhavabhuti. Thanks to Panini Sanskrit that the very innocent and most endearing fables of Panchatantra became the unforgettable part of every child in India.

### The Medieval Phase of Sanskrit

The early medieval period in northern India produced stupendous works in Sanskrit. Kashmir became the flourishing hub of Sanskrit literature. Prominent writings of this period were Somadeva's Katha-sarit-sagar, Kalhana's Rajatarangin, Gitagovinda by Jayadeva, Naishadhiyacharitam of Shri Harsha. In Southern India, the noted Sanskrit works were philosophical commentaries of

Shankara and Bilhana's Vikramankadevacharita – a biography of Chalukya King Vikramaditya 6th.

This period spanning 12-16th centuries is also significant for Northern India as the rise of Apabhramsa languages led to the production of considerable literature. Apabhramsa in Sanskrit literally means “non grammatical language”, one, which deviates from the norm of Sanskrit language. One of the examples is an early form of Hindi. This became one of the major reasons for the recession of Sanskrit.

It's popularly said that the advent of Mughal rulers discouraged the use of Sanskrit language. Audrey Trushcke, a historian at Stanford University, and an author of 'Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court' robustly dismisses it as a politically motivated argument in an article 'What we can learn from India's medieval Past'. She says it as the “politically fuelled vision of imperially led, medieval communal conflict”.

She further adds that the interest in Sanskrit spanned the reign of three emperors- Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Sanskrit based intellectuals performed various functions at the central Mughal Court for roughly 100 years (1560-1660). Sanskrit was also used to make horoscopes for members of Mughal royal family. Sanskrit text titled Suryasahasranama (Thousands Names of the Sun) was given to Akbar and Jains taught him the pronunciation of Surya's Sanskrit epithets. The three emperors also sponsored the translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian. Of the three, Akbar was the most committed as more than dozen Sanskrit works were translated into Persian under his rule including the full translations of both Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Truschke further writes that the Mughal's interest in Sanskrit texts and ideas were prominently for non-religious purposes. She cites example of Padmasundara, a Jain intellectual who created a text on Sanskrit aesthetic theory for Akbar to focus on shringaar (erotic love). Another example is of Jagannatha Panditaraja, one of the well-known Sanskrit Pandit of 17th century and one who also enjoyed the patronage of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, he wrote a poem in praise of Asaf Khan, Shah Jahan's royal vizier, on his visit to Kashmir.

Truschke says that Mughal support to Sanskrit thinkers ceased during Aurangzeb rule for two reasons. She emphasized that these reasons were nothing to do with his anti-Hindu sentiments. First was that Hindi was coming into

prominence as a literary and intellectual language of 17th century. During Shah Jahan's rule, Hindi started finding favor in place of Sanskrit and this process was completed by the time Aurangzeb came to power. The second reason for the decline of Sanskrit was the struggle for throne between Dara Shikoh, Aurangzeb's elder brother and him. When Aurangzeb won over his brother, he was to strike a balance between choosing over continuing standard Mughal modes of claiming authority and determining his own bases for power. Sanskrit became a casualty in the pursuit of latter.

Harbans Mukhia, a former professor of Medieval History of India in Jawaharlal Nehru University, critiques Audrey that "she is really reinforcing the search for legitimacy without any trace of illicit ulterior motive". He cites Norbert Elias who stated that the significance of culture as a source of legitimacy of states is a part of its self-image.

Therefore, Audrey's affirmation that the decline of Sanskrit was not due to Mughal rule but of other factors cannot be completely bought. The complex relationship of the power of culture and the culture of power needs exploration.

#### **Sanskrit in Modern Phase: Road to Institutionalization**

The advent of Britishers brought a paradigm shift in the structure and nature of Indian education system. Sanskrit, more than the medium of education, became an instrument for gaining legitimacy of their rule. Their aim was to introduce European philosophy and ideas in Sanskrit and to spread Christianity among learned Hindu elites. Second, Western education was promoted as the true, valid and useful form of knowledge. And native learning was put as decadent and superstitious. In 1791, Jonathan Duncan, a Britisher, established Benaras Sanskrit College. The reason for the establishment of the college was, One to earn the affection of 'native Hindoos' by paying attention to their indigenous systems of learning, Two, to preserve and disseminate 'Hindoo law' so that in near future College can produce doctors, lawyers and administrators which will be useful for the British administration and Three, Importantly, Britishers wanted to build relationships with Sanskrit scholars and city's pandits and bring them under their control. This will also aid in displacing the politically charged relationship that Kings shared with scholars and pandits. Thus, the road was set for the institutionalization of Sanskrit education.

The British administration demanded consistency in the curriculum of Sanskrit, measurement of the progress and achievement of students, introduction of compulsory attendance and examinations, regularity, transparency and predictability in the management of college. Interestingly, the novel moves of Britishers did not diminish the small, local, private pathshalas being conducted by Sanskrit scholars. After teaching in college, they used to privately teach Sanskrit. And it also did not impact the relationship that King of Banaras had with scholars as the former maintained its own coterie.

John Muir's tenure as superintendent-ship of one year from

1844-1845 is important as the preservation of Sanskrit learning in government sponsored education was officially given up in favor of enlightenment project. He delivered series of lectures on Western moral and intellectual philosophy in Sanskrit language. And also suggested steps to strengthen 'reasoning' powers of students in lieu of the superstitious belief system for their own 'moral improvement'. In one of his speech, he addressed Panini and Gautama as 'enquirers of truth rather than the one who has found truth'.

#### **Sanskrit in Post Independence India**

The two centuries of British rule in India could not waiver the belief in the strength of our Sanskrit language and Sanskritic values. Rather its potency to keep the newly partitioned India united and to mitigate the impact of divide and rule policies of colonizers was further accentuated. Sanskrit was hailed as the unifying force that will beautifully keep together myriad languages, cultures, religions and regions of the country.

Eminent personalities involved in the making of constitution namely Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, T.T. Krishnamachari, G. Durgabai, Pandit Lakshmikanta Maitra, Naziruddin Ahmed and 27 other constituent assembly members favored the grant of official status to Sanskrit language.

Since Indian states were re-organized on the linguistic lines, an intense uproar and controversy emerged over granting the national status to the language. Each state clamored to elevate their language to the national status. In this conflicting scenario, Sanskrit came to the much-needed refuge of constituent assembly makers. And most of the Constituent Assembly members supporting Sanskrit to be the official language came from Bengal and Madras. They believed Sanskrit as the weapon to prevent from the assault of Hindi imperialism.

Naziruddin Ahmed's interesting reason for pushing Sanskrit as the official language was it was equally difficult for all the citizens and no single community will have an unfair advantage over jobs, education or other privileges.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar believed Sanskrit to be the Himalaya of Indian languages. Many regional languages owe their birth to Sanskrit. Therefore, not much difficulty will be encountered while learning Sanskrit, as they will already be familiar with many words of the classical language.

The other very significant motive of Ambedkar behind making Sanskrit as the official language was to correct the distorted history of India. Since, Ambedkar had read most of the Sanskrit texts, he concluded that Aryans and Dravids are the original inhabitants of India. He believed that the reading of classical Sanskrit texts by masses will ultimately annihilate the caste hierarchy and destroy the false and derogatory notions attached to the Dalits.

In October 1956, Government of India appointed Sanskrit

Commission under the headship of a renowned linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee to evaluate the state of Sanskrit in the country. The official mandate was 'to undertake a survey of the existing facilities for Sanskrit education; to make proposals for promoting the study of Sanskrit...; (and) to examine the traditional system of Sanskrit education in order to find out what the features from it could be usefully incorporated into the modern system'. But it soon saw its task being extended from being merely pedagogical to now preserving the unity and integrity of the country that got infected by fissiparous tendencies. The commission noted the dangerous rise of 'regionalism' and linguistic jealousy.

This led to the further affirmation of its belief in the role of Sanskrit for aiding nation's regeneration and building its foundations anew. But the journey was not easier either. There was opposition from both the modernists and conservatives as well.

Modernists stated that Sanskrit has never played a mainstream role as it has been envisaged in post Independence India. They reasoned that Sanskrit had been a prestigious language of twice born upper caste men that depicted elitism, scholasticism, privileges, exclusivity and high ritual. Sheldon Pollock remarked that the idea that Brahman alone controlled the Sanskrit language is a colonial construct.

Whereas Conservatives were of the idea that making Sanskrit as the official language will lose its exclusive sheen and drag it down from the position of high pedestal to an everyday language making it accessible to everyone irrespective of caste, class, gender, religion, occupation and age.

The commission negated the above concerns and believed Sanskrit to be too important a "living force" to be limited to "its own ivory tower of isolation". Finally, Sanskrit got its place in the Eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution.

### **Sanskrit Today**

The language of Sanskrit in India, famously called the devabhasha, has prospered magnificently in the realm of divinity.

Today lot many yoga and meditation organizations in India and abroad have resuscitated life into the language by employing Sanskrit in the recitation of mantras.

Sahaja Yoga founded in 1970 is educating young and old on the meditational practices and Sanskrit mantras. The mantras in Sahaja Yoga book also carries both Hindi and English translation to facilitate comprehension and add bhav while recitation.

Sanskrit symbols or mantras have also become quite a rage amongst youth in selection of their tattoo designs. Clothing companies like Fab India, have incredibly contributed in making Sanskrit a fad by printing symbols, images, mantras on their clothes.

Though Sanskrit has made inroads into the lives of people, but it has not yet become a part of their lifestyle. The people

on the land of Sanskrit have little knowledge of the language. They know about Sanskrit. But unfortunately they do not know Sanskrit.

The pitiable state of Sanskrit in India today can be credited to the step motherly treatment meted out to the language in the education sector.

It is taught as an optional language in various states and at various levels from 1st to 12th standard. For example, Kerala offers Sanskrit as second language from class 1.

About 14,000 schools affiliated to Vidya Bharati Akhila Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan teach Sanskrit from class 2nd. State of Uttarakhand teach Sanskrit from class 3rd. It is also offered as part of Three Language Formula by most State Secondary Education Boards from class 6th to 10th and as second optional language in class 11th and 12th. Some states also offer it as composite course along with mother tongue as well. Though approximately five crore students study Sanskrit at school level but only few thousands are the speakers of the language.

There are about 5000 traditional Sanskrit pathshalas at school level and 1000 Veda pathshalas in the country. Eight states have Sanskrit Secondary Education Board or Directorate of Sanskrit Education. Approximately 120 general universities offer Sanskrit at UG and PG level and there exists 15 Sanskrit universities.

10 Sanskrit academies, 16 oriental research institutes, about 60 periodicals and magazines in Sanskrit exist and about hundred NGOs are working for the popularization of language.

Most of the states are offering Sanskrit at 11th and 12th for Arts stream students but very few states are offering Sanskrit to Science and commerce stream students. This is one of the major causes of a disconnect between Sanskrit and Science and technology.

Another reason for students not pursuing Sanskrit at higher education levels is the discriminate treatment meted out at school level. CBSE, NIOS and ICSE, all the three boards have removed not only Sanskrit but also local and regional language from higher secondary classes. They have three language formula till class 8th and teach two languages (English and regional) in 9th and 10th and one language that is English is taught in 11th and 12th grade.

Some states even offer new subjects like computer, environment science, agriculture, and skills in place of Sanskrit at secondary level.

Sadly, during British period Sanskrit teachers were offered low salaries in comparison to teachers teaching English and scientific subjects. The reason was that Sanskrit was taught with the primary objective of knowledge and character building. But western education was taught to prepare people

for the job of administration. And since Britishers required administrators to sustain their rule in India, so teachers teaching western subjects were offered more salaries. This legacy of low salary to Sanskrit teachers has continued till date. In many states, Sanskrit teachers are offered lesser salaries than their peers teaching other subjects. The panel headed by the former Chief Election Commissioner N Gopalaswami recommended pay parity in schools. It's palpable that when the Sanskrit educators are left to fend for themselves without much finance and institutional support, the demotivation is passed onto the students as well and they do not opt for Sanskrit in higher education thus resulting in further lesser production of Sanskrit teachers. This leads to the vicious cycle where low availability of Sanskrit teachers dismally impacts the quality of Sanskrit education.

The committee also noted the absence of B.Ed. course in Sanskrit and suggested the introduction of diploma course in Sanskrit for the students aspiring to become Sanskrit teachers.

Apart from pay discrepancy, the other conspicuous reason for the decline of Sanskrit education in India has been 'Grammar Translation Method'. Though the entire world has discarded this method, unfortunately it is still very much in use for imparting Sanskrit education in India. This Grammar Translation Method was introduced by Britishers to introduce Sanskrit literature and translate it into English and other languages. Though people could now easily comprehend the translated versions of Sanskrit literature but this has gravely affected the prosperity of Sanskrit. People read only translations and not Sanskrit. Even today, the question paper of Sanskrit comes along with the translation. Whereas the translation in other language examinations do not happen. This discriminatory nature has sapped the life, energy and dynamism from Sanskrit language. Literature of other languages has blossomed but not Sanskrit. Since, it is not easy to understand the Sanskrit language so the language has been earmarked as 'difficult' and students have taken to rote learning and memorization. This memorization has also made it a very 'scoring' subject.

Though universities now give a concession to students in admissions who have taken Sanskrit in secondary and higher secondary classes or want to opt for Sanskrit as optional language. But this has not resulted in qualitative learning of language. Result is that students know about Sanskrit but they do not know and cannot speak the language of Sanskrit. They can translate Sanskrit to other languages but not vice versa. They can understand Sanskrit but cannot converse in Sanskrit. There are Sanskrit classes and departments but no environment for Sanskrit. That's why it has become difficult to promote inter disciplinary studies in Sanskrit institutions.

### **The Way Ahead**

Many prominent personalities involved in the making of Constituent assembly including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar favored the grant of official status to Sanskrit language. Having himself read many Sanskrit texts, he was of the firm view

that Sanskrit will correct the distorted history of India. After his in-depth study, he concluded that Aryans and Dravids are the original inhabitants of India. He believed that the reading of classical Sanskrit texts by masses will ultimately annihilate the caste hierarchy and destroy the false and derogatory notions attached to the Dalits.

This paper is an attempt to state the apathetic condition of our dying language that is now spoken as their mother tongue by only 0.00198 percentage or 24,821 people of India's 121 crores of population.

There's an urgent need for the state concomitant with the civil society, academia and media to vamp up its effort and sincerity in the sustenance and preservation of our withering heritage.