

Relevance of Sanskrit in Modern World

Neerja Bhatt

‘Sanskrit, as has been universally recognised by those competent to form a judgement, is one of the most magnificent, the most perfect and wonderfully sufficient literary instruments developed by the human mind; at once majestic and sweet and flexible, strong and clearly-formed and full and vibrant and subtle.’

—Sri Aurobindo

In today’s so-called modern, fast-paced, materialistic world, people are often disinclined towards the classical Indo-European language Sanskrit. The apathy and disrespect towards this beautiful and diverse language is widely evident when many absurdly term it as a ‘dead language’, myopically believe Sanskrit to be a language used only in temples and

holy ceremonies, and consider it to be the ‘language of *sadhus*’.

Sanskrit, the word itself means refined to the most, polished, pure and perfect. For Sanskrit to regain its past glory and respect, an awareness of the rich and diverse contributions of this profound language in every aspect of human life including religion, philosophy, ethics, mathematics, sciences,

astronomy, medicine, law, literature, agriculture, botany, poetry, music, drama, education, erotics ,etc., would be essential. While the spiritual, philosophical and ritualistic contributions in Sanskrit are generally well known, the world, and particularly we Indians need to appreciate the diversity of Sanskrit to regain its past glory.

The article highlights some of the marvels of Sanskrit which can inspire us to make efforts to regain the grandeur of this magnificent language.

Literature

‘India was the motherland of our race and Sanskrit the mother of Europe’s languages’: *Will Durant, Historian.*

Most of the culture, history and tradition of India have been written in Sanskrit. And no matter whichever translations one reads, no other language seems to maintain the purity and originality. The amazing literary works by Kalidasa (famously known for his spectacular works like *Meghadootham, Kumarasambhava* and so on), Banabhatta (known for *Kadambari*, one of world’s earliest novels), Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, spiritual scriptures like the *Bhagawad Gita, Vedas,*



Poet Kalidasa

Upanishads and of course the world’s greatest epics— *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, were all originally written in Sanskrit.

Nuggets of Wisdom

Subhashitas, with *su* meaning ‘good’, and *bhashita* meaning ‘spoke’ in Sanskrit, are the contributions of great Sanskrit scholars, who have succeeded in making concise and effective poems/ stanzas which have deep and life-changing meanings. *Subhashitas* were composed by ancient saints and scholars and can be dated back to 5000 BC.

Following are two *subhashitani* talking about the importance of the virtues such as being enthusiasm, good habits, gratefulness and hard work.

उत्साह सम्पन्नं अधीर्यं सूत्रं क्रियाविधिं व्यसनेष्वासकं ।
शूरं कृतज्ञं दृढसौहृदं च लक्ष्मीः स्वयं याति निवासहेतोः ॥

The goddess Lakshmi (wealth) comes all by herself to stay with a

person who is enthusiastic, not lazy, knows how to work, one who is not interested in bad habits, brave, grateful and consistent gratitude.

उद्यमेन हि सिध्यन्ति कार्याणि न मनोरथैः ।
न हि सुप्तस्य सिंहस्य प्रविशन्ति मुखे मृगाः ॥

Tasks get accomplished by efforts and hard work, not by mere dreaming / thinking. A deer does not enter a sleeping lion's mouth (although the lion is powerful, he has to make effort to hunt and find food).

Subhashitas act like a teacher in formulating the sense of morality and in character building. Teaching them to children from a very young age can really help build their character.

The Republic of India, most institutions of National importance including the Supreme Court, the three Indian Armed forces (army, air force and navy), most educational institutions in India, and several other bodies in India have adopted Sanskrit mottos, many of which are derived from ancient Sanskrit scriptures. This is because Sanskrit mottos can convey powerful message in few words. For example, सत्यमेव जयते (truth alone triumphs), the motto of the Republic of India is taken from the *Mundaka Upanishad*, and

शंनो वरुणः (may God of sea be peaceful to us) is taken from the *Taittiriya Upanishad*.

Mathematics

Sanskrit not only preserves the true essence and beauty of spiritual and literary works, but has also played a crucial role in the development of some of the famous math formulae, computer programming and other sciences. The Indian mathematician Baudhayan, in one of the *sulba sūtras* (aphorism), described a similar theorem as the Pythagorean theorem, about 1000 years before Pythagoras! The verse goes as follows:

दीर्घचतुरश्रस्याक्षणा रज्जुः
पार्श्वमानी तिर्यग् मानी च यत् पृथग् भूते
कुरुतस्तदुभयं करोति ॥

A rope stretched along the length of the diagonal produces an area which the vertical and horizontal sides make together.

The diagonal and sides referred to are those of a rectangle, and the areas are those of the squares having these line segments as their sides. Since the diagonal of a rectangle is the hypotenuse of the right triangle formed by two adjacent sides, the statement is seen to be equivalent to the Pythagorean Theorem.

Interestingly, the *sulba sutra* has

its roots in Vedic rituals. It contains geometry related to the construction of the sacrificial/fire altar for Vedic rituals!

Organic Farming

We can read Sanskrit text to gain knowledge about farming and organic pests, which is a vital need for eco-friendly farming today. For example, the 184th verse of *Upavana-Vinoda*, a Sanskrit treatise on arbori-horticulture from the *Sarngadhara-Paddhati Paddhati* compiled by Sarngadhara sometime in the 14th century, states that a preparation made from the bark of *Karanja*, *Armavadha*, *Arishta* and *Saptaparna* along with urine, *musta* and *Vidanga* has germicidal properties. Why then do we use artificial and harmful pesticides today!

Health

Ayurveda, the knowledge of life, is considered to be the oldest healing science with a holistic approach to health and personalised medicine comprising physical, psychological, philosophical, ethical and spiritual health.

Isn't it amazing that the knowledge about plastic surgeries was written in Sanskrit by Sushruta in the 600BC, almost 150 years before

Hippocrates! In *Sushruta Samhita*, his treatise on medicine written in Sanskrit and believed to be part of the *Atharvaveda*, Sushruta vividly describes the basic principles of plastic surgery like planning, precision, haemostatic and perfection. Particularly, Sushruta's vivid explanation of Rhinoplasty (plastic surgery of nose) brought him the acclaim as the father of plastic surgery.

If we talk about the relevance of Sanskrit in living a healthy life in today's world, then the ancient *Charaka samhita* describes medicinal theories on the human body and therapies for a wide range of diseases. For example, in the modern world where people are so sleep deprived due to stress, use of technology, etc., we can learn from the *Charaka Samhita* that due to irregular sleep experiences frequent yawning, body pain, laziness, headache, swelling in the eyes and dreams. This is exactly what lead to the much later discovered saying, 'Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise' implies! While we all fondly talk about the English saying, we hardly know that our ancient doctors and *vaidyas* have been advocating proper sleep since

time immemorial! Sanskrit can thus open doors for us to a healthy and holistic lifestyle.

Ashtadhyayi

Of great marvel is the scientific and logical structure of Sanskrit grammar which was diligently and impeccably composed by the revered scholar Panini in his text *Ashtadhyayi* (a book with eight chapters) in around 500 BC. Panini, in 3959 succinct *sûtras* (aphorisms), provides a meta language that captures the fundamentals of Sanskrit language in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax. The structures of these *sutras* have direct parallels with computer science, including natural language processing. These *sutras* are not only arrangement of letters, but in fact are structures or a foundation through which we can build sentences. The sutras have an algebraic and comprehensive nature and are known as the machine which is capable of generating infinite words and sentences from a finite set of rules. The brevity of the *sutras* and the applicability of their structure in other languages and computers science add to their aesthetic and practical appeal. For example, Panini deploys a code

representation called *pratyahara* to denote several letters. For instance, Panini uses the *pratyahara* अच् to represent vowels, instead of directly mentioning the nine vowels अ इ उ ऋ लृ ए ओ ऐ औ, makes use of the यच् *pratyahara* for four letters य व र ल; *pratyahara* हल् for all the thirty-three consonants and so on. It is widely believed that NASA too acknowledges Sanskrit as one of the most appropriate languages for computer programming. *Ashtadhyayi* is rightly described as the greatest monument of human intelligence by the eminent American linguist of 20th century Leonard Bloomfield.

Phonetics and Human Body

Sanskrit is arguably the language most connected to human anatomy. The letters of Sanskrit suggest an explicit knowledge of anatomy of body. It is basically influenced by the place of origin in the vocal system comprising teeth, lips, upper roof, palate and the throat. The consonants are interestingly arranged based on the anatomy of the vocal system, starting with the lowest point, the throat, and gradually moving up to the lips. It is also said that speaking Sanskrit has the effect of

pranayama, the practice of breath control in yoga. The sound frequency of the utterance of *anusvara*, the nasal sound *am* (ॐ), is comparable with that generated during the practice of *bhramhari pranayama*, and, the *visarga* sound *ah* (अः) creates an effect similar to the *kapalbhati* pranayama where breath is released and stomach gets contracted. No wonder, speaking Sanskrit results in a very positive state of mind! Neurologists are trying to scientifically show the positive impact of repeated chanting and memorisation of Sanskrit mantras, and the evidence seems encouraging.

Minimalist Living

In these COVID days, circumstances have led us to experience and value the concept of minimalistic. But the truth is that the values of living a life with lesser wants and needs has been enshrined in Sanskrit literature. It is almost as if they could foresee everything that was going to happen!! Bhartrihari's (5th century BC) *Vairagya-Satakam* ('Hundred verses on renunciation'), emphasises the importance of renunciation and living a simple and contented life, which is so relevant in today's world.

Sanskrit remains highly relevant in today's times and would continue to remain a source of inspiration for future human endeavours in varied fields.

As it is said, दुर्लभं भारते जन्म मानुष्यं तत्र दुर्लभम् meaning it is rare (a blessing) to have been born in India, and that too as a human being. Hence, as Indians, we need to be proud of Sanskrit and appreciate its immense contributions by learning, appreciating, nurturing and spreading it. Sanskrit, Yoga and Indian Classical Music are the three beautiful gifts from ancient India to the world. Today, several countries are realising the value of Sanskrit and increasingly teaching Sanskrit in schools and universities. It would be a shame if India is left behind. Languages should be learnt for the joy and beauty. As we strive to embrace the idea of वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, meaning 'the whole world is one single family'), and sustainable living, the love and admiration for Sanskrit will help us connect better with our fellow humans and our environment. Let's resolve to spread and regain the glory of Sanskrit.

जयतु संस्कृतम्, जयतु भारतम्

