

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Learning Sanskrit: A Personal Experience

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The Call of Sanskrit!

Kuttikrishna Marar, one of the foremost Sanskrit scholars of Kerala, has written a long essay on how the sound, sense and, finally the sensibility, of Kalidasa had captured his mind through the years. Here, let me make a similar attempt, on an infinitely smaller scale, to give a small description of how the magnificence, mystery and music of Sanskrit have come to overwhelm me through the years!

The Music in Sanskrit

One of my earliest memories of childhood in the sixties is the sound of the Venkatesa suprabhatam, sung by none other than M S Subbulakshmi, wafting along with the light early morning breeze from the not too far away temple in my native place, Haripad, then a small village in Travancore. Lying half asleep, I still remember the cadence and rhythm of the rendering of the Sanskrit couplets of the Suprabhatam. Thinking back, that must have been the first time that the beauty and quiet elegance of the Deva vani, Sanskrit entered my subconscious mind.

Sanskrit – A Pilgrim Spot

Years rolled by. Through the years of schooling, Sanskrit always remained a nearby pilgrim spot that could be visited whenever and wherever we wanted. However, the visit was not to happen yet.

My second language at school was my mother tongue Malayalam. But all the classic poems that we learned – whether it be Ezhuthachan's Ramayana or Kunjan Nambiar's Kalyana Sougandhikam (which deals humorously with the plight of Bhimasena when he went in search of the Kalyana sougandhika flower) - or even

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modern poets like Ayyappa Panikker or O. N. V. Kurup, references to Sanskrit literature were bountiful and pleasing to the heart, mind and ears. Thus, Sanskrit was a constant, yet one place removed, neighbor throughout my school and college days.

Private Tutions to Quench the Thirst, and Waning Enthusiasm!

It was during one mid summer vacation while I was in college, that along with one or two friends, a courageous decision was taken to go in for private tuitions in Sanskrit with the aged Hindi professor in our college. We started out in right earnest; with classes scheduled during the mid day break at the college. However, with each passing day, our enthusiasm waned. The involved intricacies of the Siddha Roopam defeated the avid Sanskrit students in us and gradually one by one, we friends bade good bye to the noon time classes.

Will Not Give Up! Competing Interests!

Next, we came up with the idea of combined study of the famous Raghuvamsa with the help of the Malayalam commentary written by Kuttikrishna Marar. Again, the combined studies started with a lot of enthusiasm but again, alas, it too was short lived. A lot of other activities like arts club, sports, NCC, NSS etc took up our free time and Raghuvamsa had to be postponed indefinitely.

At Long Last, a Chance to Pursue!

Later, I went for post graduate studies in Linguistics. It was here that I got a fresh outlook on Sanskrit. Almost all reputed Linguistics scholars were of one view about the perfect structure of the Paninian grammar. I came to know with awe-struck admiration that in many of the famous Western Universities the study of the Paninian grammar was an inevitable part of the study of Linguistics. I also came to understand that Phonetics and Phonemics – the study of sounds and the analysis of speech sounds – even in Linguistics followed the paths laid down by Panini and Sruthakeerthi.

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Study About Sanskrit

It was at this stage that I was able to study *about* Sanskrit, though studying Sanskrit still remained a ‘pie in the sky’, an ‘akasa kusumam’.

Going through the theories of Transformational Generative Grammar – the Chomskyan revolution that overturned the way of learning and teaching languages – I was over awed to find that the underlying concepts of deep structure and surface structure were none other than the theories proposed in Sanskrit grammar. It was while learning the various viewpoints dealing with learning and teaching languages that I came to realize the magnificence and effectiveness of the structure of Sanskrit learning.

Some Practical Virtues

The far-sightedness of committing a grammar and a lexicon to the learner’s memory at an early age – the learning by rote of the Siddha Roopa and the Amarakosa – has the dual advantages of extending a person’s memory powers as well as augmenting his recall prowess.

Then came the “Udyoaga parva” (the chapter of various jobs, transfers and postings that accompanies any career) in my life and I enjoyed (and am still enjoying) my varied career as a member of the Indian Information Service. It was in the course of various transfers that I came across the conversational classes conducted by the Samskritha Bharathi, a voluntary organization for propagating Sanskrit.

Learning Sanskrit to Speak!

It is now four months since I started attending the weekly classes. It is based on simple uses of Sanskrit and slowly working to its grammatical complexities. It is amazing to see how we – there are 9 of us and almost all of us well into the third or fourth decade or more of life – have been able to gradually grow comfortable with the language.

Yes, as the well known linguist Bloomfield had remarked “you learn your mother tongue when you try to learn your “other” tongue”. Yes, the Deva vani is offering us the dual benefit of understanding Sanskrit as well as further appreciating our mother tongue!

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