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Is Sanskrit A Dead Language : A Study

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Abstract : *Sanskrit is a historical Indo-Aryan language. The affinity of Sanskrit is with Greek, Italic, Celtic, German, Balto-Slavonic and Iranian languages constituting the Indo-European family of languages.. There is a wealth of knowledge available in Sanskrit which scientists and technologists are discovering today. Sanskrit has survived so far because of its flexibility and versatility. But, a number of sociolinguistic studies of spoken Sanskrit strongly suggest that oral use of Sanskrit is limited so it is a dead language. Some think it's a useless language. The fact is quite different. Modern works continue to be produced in Sanskrit. The*

objective of this research work is to make a comparison between the living language and the dead language. Sanskrit is quite obviously not dead. It is spoken, written and read all over the world. Our purpose is to open a new dimension of knowledge about Sanskrit language. This study will help us to show that Sanskrit is still very much alive.

Key words : *Sanskrit, Dead language, Living language, Present status, Computational analysis.*

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Introduction:

भाषासु मुख्या मधुरा दिव्या गीर्वाण भारती।

तस्माद्धि काव्यं मधुरं तस्मादपि सुभाषितम् ॥

(The speech of India (Sanskrit), is the foremost, the sweetest and the divine among all languages. The poetry becomes sweet because of it and even the sayings become eloquent.)

Sanskrit, which literally means “**cultured or refined**”, is the classical language of India and is the oldest and the most systematic language in the world. **Forbes Magazine**, (July, 1987) wrote: “Sanskrit is the mother of all the European languages and is the most suitable language for the computer software.” It is older than Hebrew or Latin. Sanskrit is a historical Indo-Aryan language.

Its prestige, sway and authority among other languages of the world are quite unique and undeniable.

Sanskrit scriptures have invaluable pearls of knowledge, wisdom & ancient Hindu vedantic philosophy. According to **Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru**, (K.R. Malkani, Hindustan Times) "If I was asked what the greatest treasure which India possesses is and what is her finest heritage, I would answer unhesitatingly it is the Sanskrit language and literature, and all that it contains. This is a magnificent inheritance, and so long as it endures and influences the life of our people, so long the basic genius of India will continue." Corpus of Sanskrit encompasses a rich traditional, technical, philosophical and dharma texts. It is a store house of knowledge acquired through centuries in various areas like science, mathematics, architecture, climatology, agriculture, physics, mechanics, engineering, medicine, the arts and some of it is still useful and relevant.

Sanskrit has survived so far because of its flexibility and versatility. But, a number of sociolinguistic studies of spoken Sanskrit strongly suggest that oral use of Sanskrit is limited so it is a **dead language**. Shyam Rao (1999 : 1) speaking, "Sanskrit is Dead. Sanskrit is for all intents and purposes, a dead language." Some think it's a useless language. *Sheldon Pollock* Says, "most observers would agree that, in some crucial way, Sanskrit is dead" (Pollock, 2001:393). He describes it in comparison with the 'dead' language of Latin (Pollock, 2001:415).

Hanneder (2002) and *Hatcher* (2007) contest Pollock's characterization, pointing out that modern works continue to be produced in Sanskrit. *Hanneder* (2009) argues that modern works in Sanskrit are either ignored or their "modernity" contested. Pollock's notion of the "death of Sanskrit" remains in this unclear realm between

academia and public opinion when he says that "most observers would agree that, in some crucial way, Sanskrit is dead" (Hanneder, 2002 : 294).

The statement that Sanskrit is a dead language is misleading. Sanskrit is spoken, written and read all over the world. Such an understanding does great injustice to the great genius of the language and betrays ignorance of the work of great writers, thinkers, sages and scientists like *Kautilya*, *Charaka*, *Sushruta*, *Aryabhata*, *Varahmihira*, *Brahmagupta*, *Bhaskaracharya* and others. According to Dr. *Shreyansh Dwivedi* , contrary to popular notions, Sanskrit is most alive today than it has ever been. The trouble is that most people do not realize how much is happening in this field.

Objectives:

Sanskrit language has been with us for over 10,000 years. It has been our spoken language for thousands of years. It has been made clear that Sanskrit is important for our values and it is important for us to keep Sanskrit as one of our main-stream languages. The objective of this work is to make a comparison between a living language and a dead language and to enable us to speculate on a new dimension of knowledge about Sanskrit language and its present position.

Methodology:

The study on the topic "Is Sanskrit A Dead Language" is based on :

- i) Primary data
 - Questionnaire Method
 - Direct Personal Interviews
 - Observation schedule
- ii) Secondary data
 - Books
 - Journals
 - Newspapers
 - Internet

Distinction between living language and dead language:

A **living language** is one that is in current use. It is learned in infancy from one's family and community. Living languages have native speakers and are transmitted from parent to child.

A language that is no longer learned as a native language is called **dead language**. It is a language that people do not commonly speak in the world today. Dead languages are still in use. However, they are not learned as first languages.

A language is often declared to be dead even before the last native speaker of the language has died. If there are only a few elderly speakers of a language remaining, and they no longer use that language for communication, then the language is effectively dead.

An **extinct language** is similar to a dead language with the important exception that extinct languages are no longer spoken, even as a second language, by anyone. Hundreds (probably thousands) of language have become extinct and today many are threatened with extinction.

We have come to know the features of a dead language. This will be very helpful in study about Sanskrit.

Status of Sanskrit in India:

In a landmark judgment delivered in October 1994 the Supreme Court of *Bharat* held that without learning Sanskrit it was not possible to decipher *Bharatiya* philosophy, culture and heritage. All the classics such as *Vedas*, *Puranas* and *Upanishads*, and the most enlightening literature of *Kalidasa*, *Bhavabhuti*, *Banbhata*, *Dandi* etc. were in Sanskrit. The teachings of *Sankracharya*, *Ramanuja*, *Madhvacharya*, *Nimbarka* and *Vallabhacharya* would not have been possible without this language, said the

judges of the apex court, laying special emphasis on the historical relevance of this ancient language." (M. NARASIMHACHARY, THE HINDU)

The Madras High Court has 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. (M. NARASIMHACHARY, THE HINDU)

Sanskrit language is one of the scheduled languages recognized under the VIIIth schedule of the constitution. Sanskrit is the second official language of *Uttarakhand*. Sanskrit is taught as an optional subject in the schools from 8th standard onwards. It is also taught at the college and the University level. **The study of Sanskrit is presently available in two forms:**

(I) One is general education of Sanskrit in which a nominal acquaintance with the knowledge is given up to matriculation. Even further, up to graduation level students can offer Sanskrit as one of three subjects of studies and may further opt for Sanskrit as the subject for post graduation.

(II) The other system of studying Sanskrit is through the traditional *vidyapeeths*, at four levels. *Prathama*, *Madhyama*, *Shastri* and *Acharya*. *Madhyama* level is equivalent to Matriculation and is expected to make the student proficient enough so as to undertake the study of other subjects through the medium of Sanskrit. However this fact is not fully appreciated or utilized in the study of *Shastri* or *Acharya* levels. The present syllabi at these levels offer only the following subjects for higher study: a) Sanskrit. b) *Dharamshastra* which is a major canvas and accommodates many other subjects like ethics, philosophy, economics, political science etc. and also science in small amounts. c) Jyotish.

Sanskrit is the second language to all those who have studied it. Their mother tongue would be some regional language. So, there will be code switching from their mother tongue to Sanskrit and vice versa.

Spoken Sanskrit is still in use in a few traditional institutions in India and there are many attempts at revival. Indian newspapers have published reports about several isolated villages, where, as a result of recent revival attempts, large parts of the population, including children, are learning Sanskrit and are even using it to some extent in everyday communication:

1. *Mattur* in Karnataka
2. *Mohad*, District: Narasinhpur, Madhya Pradesh
3. *Jhiri*, District: Rajgadh, Madhya Pradesh
4. *Kaperan*, District: Bundi, Rajasthan
5. *Khada*, District: Banswada, Rajasthan
6. *Ganoda*, District: Banswada, Rajasthan
7. *Bawali*, District: Bagapat, Uttar Pradesh
8. Shyamsundarpur, District : Kendujhar, Orissa (Wikipedia)

Sanskrita Bharati, a non-profit organization, is primarily dedicated to the mission of popularizing Sanskrit as a spoken language. Moving beyond veneration of Sanskrit as a classical or exotic language, *Sanskrita Bharati* seeks to make this a contemporary language whose everyday usage becomes customary and widespread. This goal is being gradually realized with steady progress in the escalating numbers of Sanskrit speakers.

In 2009, *Satyavrat Shastri* became the first Sanskrit author to win the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary award. (The Indian Express)

Symbolic usage:

In the Republic of India, in Nepal and Indonesia, Sanskrit phrases are widely used as mottoes for various educational and social

organizations (much as Latin is used by some institutions in the West). The motto of the Republic is also in Sanskrit.

Republic of India

‘सत्यमेव जयते’ *Satyameva Jayate* “Truth alone triumphs”

Supreme Court of India

‘यतो धर्मस्ततो जयः’ *Yato Dharmastato Jayaha* “Whence dharma, thence victory”

Goa

‘सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मा कश्चिदुःखभाग्भवेत्’ *Sarve Bhadrāni Paśyantu Mā Kaścid Duḥkhabhāg bhavet* “May all perceive good, may not anyone attain unhappiness”

Life Insurance Corporation of India

‘योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहम्’, *Yogakshemam Vahāmyaham* “I shall take care of welfare” (taken from the Bhagavad Gita)

Indian Navy

‘शं नो वरुणः’ *Shanno Varuna* “May Varuna be peaceful to us”

Indian Air Force

‘नभः स्पृशं दीप्तम्’ *Nabah-Sprsam Dīptam* “Touching the Sky with Glory” (from Bhagavad Gita: XI, Verse 24)

Mumbai Police

‘सद्रक्षणाय खलनिग्रहणाय’ *Sadrakshanaaya Khalanigrahanaaya* “For protection of the good and control of the wicked”

Indian Coast Guard

‘वयं रक्षामः’ *Vayam Rakshāma* “We protect”

All India Radio

‘बहुजनहिताय बहुजनसुखाय’ *Bahujana-hitāya bahujana-sukhāya* “For the benefit of all, for the comfort of all”

Rajputana Rifles

‘वीरभोग्या वसुधरा’ *Veerabhogyā Vasundhara* “The earth is fit to be ruled by the brave”

Other countries

Nepal

‘जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी’ *Janani*

Janmabhūmisca Svargādapi garīyasi “Mother and motherland are greater than heaven”

Indonesian Navy

‘जलेष्वेव जयामहे’ *Jalesveva Jayamahe* “On the

Sea We Are Glorious”

Aceh Province

‘पञ्चचित’ *Pancacita* “Five Goals.”

Many of the post–Independence educational institutions of national importance in India and Sri Lanka have Sanskrit mottoes. Many of India’s and Nepal’s scientific and administrative terms are named in Sanskrit, as a counterpart of the western practice of naming scientific developments in Latin or Greek. The Indian guided missile program that was commenced in 1983 by DRDO has named the five missiles (ballistic and others) that it has developed as *Prithvi, Agni, Akash, Nag* and *Trishul*. India’s first modern fighter aircraft is named *HAL Tejas*.

News are broadcast in Sanskrit both on Radio and TV in India. Books are published totally in Sanskrit. There are some places in India where nothing but Sanskrit is spoken. There are musicians/song writers who compose songs spontaneously in Sanskrit – such as the spiritual *Guru Sri Ganapati Sachchidananda Swamiji*. Poetry is still written in Sanskrit.

Recital of Sanskrit *shlokas* as background chorus in films, television advertisements and as slogans for corporate organizations has become a trend. The opera *Satyagraha* by Philip Glass uses texts from the *Bhagavad Gita*, sung in original Sanskrit.

Recently, Sanskrit also made an appearance in Western pop music in two recordings by

Madonna. One, “*Shanti/Ashtangi*”, from the 1998 album *Ray of Light*, is the traditional *Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga* chant referenced above set to music. The second, “*Cyber-raga*”, released in 2000 as a B-side to *Madonna’s* album *Music*, is a Sanskrit-language ode of devotion to a higher power and a wish for peace on earth. The climactic battle theme of *The Matrix Revolutions* features a choir singing a Sanskrit prayer from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in the closing titles of the movie. Composer *John Williams* featured choirs singing in Sanskrit for *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.^[citation needed]

The Sky1 version of the title sequence in season one of *Battlestar Galactica 2004* features the *Gayatri Mantra*, taken from the *Rig Veda* (3.62.10). The composition was written by miniseries composer *Richard Gibbs*.

Sanskrit has also seen a significant revival in China. Musicians such as *Sa Dingding* have written pop songs in Sanskrit (BBC- Awards for World Music 2008-Asia-Pacific broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and BBC four television).

There is no dispute about the place of Sanskrit in India’s heritage and the contribution it has made to its culture and sense of identity. (Deccan Herald, 2012).

Status of Sanskrit in Foreign countries:

Ever since 2nd February, 1786, when Sir William Jones, in a paper presented to the Royal Asiatic Society, in Calcutta, said, “the wonderful structure” of the Sanskrit language, is “more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either,” the West has been busy learning from Sanskrit (Jawaharlal Nehru, 1994:165). There are essentially two traditions of teaching Sanskrit in the West today: one scholastic, as a classical subject taught in the universities; the

other as a religious discourse in the various temples being built by the cash rich Indian Diaspora. The scholastic tradition, which began a couple of centuries ago continues till today.

The first chair in Sanskrit in **England**, the *Boden Chair*, was set up at Oxford in 1831, continues till today in addition to two other faculty positions. Professor *Richard Gombrich*, the present occupant of the chair, is known worldwide for his extraordinary work on *Theravada Buddhism*.

According to **Gombrich**: "The reasons for studying Sanskrit today are the same as they ever were: that the vast array of Sanskrit texts preserves for us a valuable part of the cultural heritage of mankind, including much beautiful literature and many interesting, even fascinating, ideas."

Oxford and The University of **Edinburgh** offers either a full honours course in Sanskrit or a joint honours course with Latin, Greek or Linguistics.

The Sanskrit craze has, however, caught up in the **US**. Unlike Britain and unlike its own past, it is totally demand driven. The teaching of Sanskrit first began at **Yale University** under **professor Salisbury** in the late 19th century. His student William Dwight Whitney became the pioneer in the development of American Sanskrit studies. This soon spread to **Harvard, Berkeley, Chicago, Michigan, Pennsylvania and other campuses**.

Today Sanskrit is being taught as an Indo-European language in dozens of universities in the US.

However, the interest in Sanskrit persists even in those places where there is no demand. **The last World conference of the International Association of Sanskrit studies held at Turin, in Italy, according to Brockington was an eye-opener. There were a number of Sanskrit scholars from the Eastern European countries, including Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria,**

and Russia. Unlike the US, most of these countries hardly have much of an NRI population. They hardly have any temples. There is no community funding and no involvement of local populations. Yet, the zeal for Sanskrit continues.

A page on "Academic Sanskrit Studies around the World" is available at my web.uiowa.edu/pjai/Sanskrit/SanskritStudies.htm. It has been posted by *Pankaj Jain*, who teaches Sanskrit at Rutgers University at New Brunswick in the US. It shows an impressive list of resources available on Sanskrit education globally. The site offers information about the institutions in India, North America, Australia, Europe (Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and Switzerland), the Middle East, Japan and Thailand. In addition, the list also covers summer courses, tools and material for home study.

Sanskrit is of course a vital part of Indian cultural heritage, but, just as the influence of Greek and Latin has spread far beyond their country of origins, it has universal appeal. Sanskrit is global. Sanskrit has travelled all over the world, not just in India. The use of Sanskrit in India and around the world is so wide that to say it's dead would be speaking against truth.

Computer and Sanskrit:

The fact that Sanskrit language, the rules of its grammar and the shabdabodh are of great utility in the development of computer language has been acknowledged by many computer experts in USA and Europe. Computer experts such as *Dr Rick Briggs, Dr Vyas Housten and Dr David Lavin* have written extensively bringing out the usefulness of Sanskrit language in developing computer software.(Panchamukhi: The Hindustan Times).

Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), Hyderabad is working on a project called Natural Language Processing (NLP). The goal of

NLP is to build computational methods of natural language for its analysis and generation. Similar work is going on at C-DAC, Bangalore. The project is called Natural Language Understanding (NLU). The association of Sanskrit with computer is constantly bridging the distance between the science of ancient world and the world of modern science. Computer scientists and Sanskrit *pundits* all over the world are trying to use the computer technology in the field of Sanskrit studies. Many such efforts have already started in India. In this regard, Government of India has initiated two major projects:

(a) Technology Development for Indian Languages (TDIL)

(b) Sansk-net project. (site name: <http://www.sansknet.org>)

Corpora, generally, refers to the complete collection of writings in a machine-readable form, which have different uses in linguistics and its application, such as: preparation of lexicon, grammar, dictionaries, thesaurus, frequency list and the like. It would not only provide basic research facilities for studying linguistic features but also meet the practical need of translation, knowledge-based compilations and such other applications. Many institutions and persons have engaged themselves in the development of such corpora under Indian Heritage Group (IHG). The names of the Institutions are as follows:

- (1) Chinmaya Foundation (CF), Cochin.
- (2) Puraana Prajna Suddhodhana Mandiram (PPSM), Bangalore.
- (3) Academy of Sanskrit Research, Melkote (ASRM).
- (4) The Rashstriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha (RSVP), Tirupati.
- (5) Ahobila Math Sanskrit College (AMSC), Madhurantakam.

IIT, Kanpur, from 1983 onwards, has undertaken a project attempting to utilize the Sanskrit grammar structure and particularly, Panini's theory, for an interlingual machine translation system among pairs of Indian languages. This project has achieved considerable success by now, covering Hindi, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, etc.

The advanced computer technology has revolutionized almost all parts of human life and field of education is no exception. This attempt to use the modern technology for analyzing the ancient works will be helpful to the scholastic community as a whole in learning, understanding and interpreting ancient Indian knowledge in a better way. Such packages can also prove useful in teaching ancient Indian *shastric* texts effectively and with more efficiency. It can also be used as supporting systems for research. Thus, there is immense potential in this field, which needs to be explored.

In this way we can develop search packages based ancient texts. It is quite obvious that, for preparing such packages, the knowledge of Computer and knowledge of Sanskrit should go hand in hand and complement each other for better results. What is required in future is the increased co-operation between a Computer professionals and Sanskrit *Pandits*. As a matter of fact, the following texts have been entered by these Institutions.

Survey Report :

We have conducted a Survey to get opinion on the topic 'IS SANSKRIT A DEADLANGUAGE' based on the questionnaire. We interviewed 30 students of different departments at the U.G. and P.G. level and 20 teachers of colleges and Sanskrit Colleges. They filled the Questionnaire.

Findings:

- 98% accepted that Sanskrit is not a dead language. It represents our culture and heritage.
- 78% accepted its historical, literal and scientific importance.
- 60% accepted that Sanskrit is the most relevant in modern context.
- Only 60% are aware that Sanskrit is most suitable language for computer.
- 100% advocated promotion of Sanskrit.
- 75% accepted that more job opportunities should be created for Sanskrit scholars.
- 100% teachers advocated that it should be introduced at the primary level in schools.

Conclusion:

Sanskrit therefore seems to hold the key to global blossoming. It's time now for us to start exploring our ancient languages and literatures which would surely help the society and benefit the mankind. There is a need to carry out research on our Vedas, particularly *Atharva Veda*, for eliciting valuable information in science and technology relating to medicine, flight sciences, material sciences and many other related fields. Cryptology is another area where Sanskrit language is liberally used.

Finally we can say that Languages like Sanskrit or Latin, not actively spoken outside academia does not mean that the language is no longer utilized. Language does not have to be "alive" just by having it spoken. It can be "alive" when we read it or use it in any non-spoken capacity. Indeed, speaking a language is one of the main components of what makes a language alive. However, in the anthropology and archaeology departments that we find in many universities, Sanskrit, Latin, Egyptian hieroglyphics, cuneiform

are actively used for research, so in this capacity these languages are certainly not dead.

संस्कृतं न कदापि मृतमभवत् मृतं नास्ति न भविष्यति च।

Sanskrit has never been dead, it is not dead and it will not be.

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