

The sanitising power of spoken Sanskrit

H himalmag.com/sanitising-power-spoken-sanskrit/

27/02/2014

Grounded

By [Patrick McCartney](#)

27 February 2014

Revived interest in Sanskrit study in India reveals patriotism and a problematic nationalism.



*Learning Sanskrit.
Flickr/ Avnish Tiwary*

Out in northeast Delhi, nestled amidst the industrial, agricultural, and residential suburb of Mandoli, is a small compound where a committed group of Sanskrit enthusiasts live, study, teach and speak only Sanskrit. Camps are held there year round, run by Samskrita Bharati, an organisation devoted entirely to propagating spoken Sanskrit “in every home and in every village” (*grihe grihe graame graame*). This motivating ideological force extends to “every city in every nation” as well (*nagare nagare deshe deshe*).

Samskrita Bharati is a part of the Sangh Parivar, the collection of nationalist, political, social, paramilitary, religious and cultural organisations devoted to the furthering of its particular version of ‘patriotic’ Hinduism. The Sangh would like to see an ideal utopian Hindu nation and world with Sanskrit as its lingua franca. Samskrita Bharati’s role in this movement is linguistic and cultural; however, it is enmeshed in the political, religious, and para-military

preoccupations of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), respectively. Sanskrit is a symbolic vehicle for the ideology and practices of the Sangh Parivar. Samskrita Bharati's mandate is to undertake the "Revival of Sanskrit as a mass communication language (*jaanabhaashaa*) and facilitation of common man's access to its vast knowledge treasure."

I first attended Samskrita Bharati's residential spoken-Sanskrit camp near Nand Nagari (the city of bliss) in Delhi for a month in 2009. The *samvadshaala*, as the camp is known, means the 'hall where people converse'. This particular camp runs throughout the year, except between February and April. Samskrita Bharati operates in 19 countries including the US, Germany and Australia, facilitating similar Sanskrit camps to those in India. However, the Mandoli camp is the operation's flagship course. The other camps run less frequently, or for shorter periods.

I returned in late 2013 to revive my own spoken Sanskrit and to take a closer look at the camp, what they teach and why, and the types of students motivated to attend these camps. Having attended the camp three times in total, my spoken Sanskrit is much better for this intensive instruction. I can understand spoken Sanskrit reasonably well, and can hold a conversation, though grammatical errors still creep in.

*

The Mandoli camp is located in a semi-industrial and agricultural area across the Uttar Pradesh-Delhi border, where factories pumping out plumes of smoke day and night are adjacent to fields growing vegetables and fruits. To get to the camp one must set out east along GT Road, heading past the Tibetan Colony and over the Yamuna River. Alternatively, one could take the MRT Red Line bus to Dilshad Garden from Kashmere Gate, and then a rickshaw for the remainder of the journey. Eventually, one will arrive at the Durga Mata Mandir compound.

Seated in the office soon after arriving, waiting to register, I was suddenly confronted by the reality that for the following two weeks I would only be speaking Sanskrit – or at least listening to it (as on my first visit in 2009 when I had no ability to converse). Questions came from every corner in rapid-fire Sanskrit. I caught words here and there, but my attempts to respond in English were laid aside with commands like "*Kevalam samskritam vadatu*; speak only in Sanskrit." Returning this third time I felt more anxiety as I knew what to expect: that I would be woken at five o'clock with commands of "*shigram shigram utthishthatu utthishthatu*; Get up quickly," with little respite from the grueling schedule until ten at night, everyday, for the next 14 days. I knew that thoughts of leaving would fill my mind on countless occasions. I simply had to ignore them and try to remain focused on the present, the task at hand. My friends in Hauz Khas Village would still be there when I returned.

The camps are attended by both men and women; each mixed cohort of about 30 is comprised of around three-quarters men. Women sit on the left side of the room and men on the right, and the two groups are given little opportunity to interact, even in the classroom. At the end of the classes the women leave first to ensure there is no fraternising in the corridors. Even after meals the mens are sent downstairs and out of the building to another sink so as to avoid any mixing. The average age of the attendees is about 25 years. Many aspire to work as Sanskrit teachers. While some of these students believe that an ability to speak Sanskrit is important for the authentic Sanskrit teacher's identity, other attendees, such as housewives and retirees, appear to do it just for 'time-pass', or perhaps with an interest in learning something new, or even for refreshing their rusty spoken Sanskrit.

The fun and adventure of the camp can be a motivation for others: Ananda Pandey enjoyed the road trip with friends from Nasik, Maharashtra, to Delhi. Ananda is 73 and can still perform the hatha yoga headstand posture every morning for several minutes. He claims it helps him to remember how to speak Sanskrit. Ananda and his three friends from Nasik come once a year to the camp to revive their spoken Sanskrit, but also to share the company of like-minded people. They see it as a duty, both religious and national. All attendees I met appeared to be motivated by a confluence of professional, devotional and patriotic ideas. They come to support Samskrita Bharati's quest to "revive a language, rejuvenate a culture, and revolutionise the world".

The total fee of the camp, including accommodation, food and tuition, comes to a nominal amount of about INR 600. Even the poorest Sanskrit enthusiasts are able to attend the programme without a great financial burden. Many of the attendees are BA, and possibly MA, graduates of Sanskrit. Some might even be studying towards a PhD at a prestigious institution such as Banaras Hindu University.

Anoop is a typical student. He is 26, from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh, a Brahmin (Mishra), who is eager to marry soon. He has a postgraduate degree in computing and works full-time for an international manufacturer of industrial piping. However, his aim is to get an MA in Sanskrit literature the following year in order to become a Sanskrit teacher. He wants to be able to speak Sanskrit correctly (*samyak ruupena*) as he considers this essential for marketing himself as an expert on the language. Anoop also considers this his duty as an Indian and a Hindu, in line with the rhetoric of the organisation that claims Sanskrit to be the original mother tongue (*matri bhasha*) with a destiny to replace all state and national languages. In its extreme rendition, the argument is that a true patriot (*deshabhakta*) will speak Sanskrit and nothing else.

Like Anoop, many of the participants use the course to gain cultural capital in their professional and personal fields, to demonstrate an all-round commitment to career, community, country and religion. They generally come from across north India. Soni Balla, aged 25, is a Sanskrit student from Manipur who was attending the camp for the second time. She, like her two travelling companions, planned to stay for at least a month and it had taken them approximately a week's travel overland to reach Delhi.

**

Is Sanskrit a dead language? Of the nine criteria used by UNESCO for assessing language vitality and endangerment, one factor assesses whether inter-generational transmission occurs through the immediate family network, regardless of any socio-religious factors that may promote its study outside the family unit. By this count, UNESCO considers Sanskrit an endangered language. Of course, mantras are chanted across India and around the world, where devout Hindus live and practitioners of syncretic 'new-age' religions or yoga schools operate. Sanskrit is uttered in homes and in temples, as religious duties and practices are performed. However, what I refer to is the use of Sanskrit in a discursive sense, as English or Hindi is used as a means of communication. The difference, then, is between Sanskrit being sung and spoken.

The recent Indian census estimates that about 15,000 people use Sanskrit on a regular basis, or claim it as their first language. That amounts to 0.00125 percent of India's total population. From 1971 there was a steady increase in the number of people who 'spoke' Sanskrit as a first language until it reached a record of just under 50,000 people in 1991. Even if we take the overall figure to be unreliable, what could have been the motivating factors behind this increase? In the build-up to the opening of India's economy in the early 1990s, and the subsequent rise in interest regarding what constitutes India's international identity, people were motivated by patriotic and religious sentiments to assert Sanskrit as their mother tongue, regardless of whether they could actually hold a conversation beyond a few standard introductory phrases. I have heard people claim they can 'speak' Sanskrit because they can utter the syllable 'Om'.

When asked what their matri bhasha is, the tendency among some Hindi speakers is to conflate the language they speak at home with the language from which Hindi partly originates, Sanskrit. I doubt there are many individuals who are native speakers, having learnt Sanskrit from their parents in their homes, although I have met a handful here and there. Most people I have met have learnt it through traditional Sanskrit schools (*paathashaala*). While Sanskritic hymns are respected by many Hindus in India, the cultural practice of actually speaking Sanskrit is left to a committed minority of enthusiasts. In order to hear Sanskrit spoken one needs to locate a 'language nest' where its daily use is cultivated.

The 'revival' of Sanskrit as a language of mass communication is deeply embedded within the nationalist project. Historians and philologists are uncertain about how much Sanskrit was spoken in the past. One interpretation is that it was a restricted language for *dvijaas*, or twice-born males, only used in ritual and conversation among a cultural elite. Evidence from plays such as Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* point to a potential diglossic situation, in which a community speaks both 'high' and 'low' variants of the same language. As Sheldon Pollock suggests, participation was restricted or prohibited regardless of an individual's linguistic inheritance. Punishments to prevent further transgressions included pouring molten tin and lac into the ears of women or non-twice-born males who dared listen to Sanskrit mantras, according to the ancient legal text *Manava Dharma Shaastra*. The punishment for a non-dvijaa learning or teaching Sanskrit was for their bodies to be hacked to pieces.

The Samskrita Bharati, founded in 1981, is devoted to making a language once restricted to the religious elite, open to anyone wishing to learn it. This might appear to breach a fundamental law inscribed in the Sanskritic legal code, but the argument Samskrita Bharati uses to counter such a contradiction is that Sanskrit belongs to everyone and so no one should be restricted from learning or speaking it. If Sanskrit is to become the 'people's language', then anachronistic prescriptions must be relaxed or ignored.

When I asked the teachers at the camp their views on these punishments, I encountered emotion and astonishment. None of the teachers had any knowledge of these prescriptions against non-dvijaas learning, speaking or teaching Sanskrit. I was told: "I am a Brahmin and you are not, yet here we are speaking Sanskrit together. These laws of Manu do not matter today. Sanskrit is for everyone." Lokesh Chandra, an eminent scholar of Buddhism and Sanskrit, believes that:

We must not forsake Sanskrit because it helps us to remain Dharmic (moral) in our approach to life. To that extent Sanskrit is our link between this world and a higher world, glimpses which we see and experience from time to time. The danger of losing Sanskrit is no less than losing our past, our history, our identity and our self knowledge. In other words, Sanskrit as a medium or carrier of Sanskriti, or cultural refinement and definition is indispensable to India. Sanskrit is not merely a language but a larger system of ideas, thought and cultural practices.

Sociologist M N Srinivas describes Sanskritisation as a process in which individuals or groups adopt the language and affiliated cultural practices as a way of ascending the social ladder. In some social networks, an all-round knowledge of Sanskrit, complemented by an ability to speak it, confers more prestige and status upon the individual. However, for various reasons, not all paathashaalas advocate the discursive use of Sanskrit. I found that most people have not taken their Sanskrit studies beyond the eighth or tenth grade of high school. When on my travels across the subcontinent I share my interest in Sanskrit, most people begin reciting (rather poorly) some fragment of a noun paradigm remembered from their childhood... "*gajah gajau gajaah*; one elephant, two elephants, many elephants".

An ability to speak Sanskrit appears to be coveted only by patriots (*deshabhaktas*) and so for a secularist not interested in aligning with a Hindutva ideology (or some reimagined Brahminical derivative of an idealised and authentic 'Vedic' lifestyle) the use of Sanskrit loses most of its symbolic potency and currency. The use of Sanskrit has been appropriated by the Hindu right, and for this reason secularists and modernists alike may be disinclined to identify with such a practice. The study of Sanskrit is promoted by Samskrita Bharati as a matter of duty that devout and loyal Hindus (and all Indians) should perform. However, architects and icons of the modern Indian state, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and B R Ambedkar, once lobbied for Sanskrit to become the national language, citing China's adoption of Mandarin and Israel's adoption of Hebrew as successful examples. Such petitions, as we know, were not successful, and a Sanskritised version of Hindi was chosen instead. This was seen as a middle ground, capable of instilling the virtues of Sanskrit while being more accessible to the masses.

Sanskrita Bharati is proud of being active in the community, promoting Sanskrit in villages scattered through Uttarakhand, Assam, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. These are meant to serve as ideological examples of the moral benefits a community can accrue through choosing to speak Sanskrit over other languages. This has supposedly led to entire communities renouncing alcohol, the consumption of meat and other 'vices' and moral dangers. Some have even rejected their first languages in favour of Sanskrit. This is said to be due to the power of Sanskrit to transform the lives of those who speak the 'language of the gods'. The founder of Samskrita Bharati, Chamu Krishna Shastry, believes that "*Samskritam karanena jivanam parivartanam*; through the work of Sanskrit lives are reformed." Articles related to this appear once or twice a year in the Indian media. The villages in which "people only speak Sanskrit" share a mythical iconic space that points to a potential, rather than an actual, reality, where Sanskrit could be spoken again beyond the formative language nests.

Part of Samskrita Bharati's mission is to "attain social harmony and national integration by taking Sanskrit to the masses regardless of caste and creed". A sticker adorning almost every room in the building states "*vishvabhaashaa hi samskritam*; Sanskrit is the only world language". This phrase provides an entry into the ideology and aspirations of the Sangh Parivar. The use of Sanskrit is deeply connected to the nationalistic patriotism of Hindutva ideology. In a sense, the Hindu right has appropriated Sanskrit for their own moral and political agenda, and is implementing it as part of their cultural hegemonic aims. For national unity and world peace, a Brahminical ideology and practice should be established under a Hindu kingdom with a hyper-masculinised Ram as its semiticised, monotheistic figurehead. There will be no trouble as long as everyone joins in by adopting a similar schema of perception and disposition. Social harmony and national integration mean being the right type of Hindu, the right type of Indian, and speaking fluent Sanskrit.

Throughout the course, the RSS ideologue M S Golwalkar was never mentioned, though his teachings is seminal to the camp's ideology. He is known for his espousal of an idea of India dominated by Hindus, where minorities submit to a Hindu cultural paradigm. One of his famous quotes argues:

That [the subordination and indoctrination of minorities] is the only sound view on the minorities problem. That is the only logical and correct solution. That alone keeps the national life healthy and undisturbed... The foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment not even citizen's rights.

According to this view, all of the moral panic and ethnic dangers that modernity and globalisation present as threats to India's moral fibre will simply disappear with the mono-cultural spread of Sanskrit. I've come to view the power of Sanskrit as similar to an antibiotic balm. Its utterances will lead to the restoration of a traditional, conservative society, while at the same time, as I heard on countless occasions, it will work to right the wrongs committed by the British and Muslims who apparently 'only stole from India' (at one point during the camp a student personally held me responsible for the thefts perpetrated by the Britishers). An example of this belief in sanitisation, in the moral power of tradition, is exemplified in the teachers' problem with the use of the term 'tube light', instead of the Sanskrit term *dandadiipah*. "Why do we use 'tube light' when we have our own words like *dandadiipah*?" was a common rhetorical question posed to students.

The idea of a '*Muslim samasya*' (Muslim problem) was something I only heard uttered twice. It was never mentioned during class. It was brought up, however, during a rest period, between some students, teachers and elders (*gyesthas*) of Samskrita Bharati, visiting for the day to give guest lectures. The belief was that violence is not required; Sanskrit will do the work of conversion or purification. At least, this is the more benign, albeit intolerant, view promoted through Samskrita Bharati. Hate-filled vitriolic speech is left to other wings of the Sangh. We were told on several occasions that the moral edificatory power of Sanskrit is so powerful that nobody within a certain

radius of the compound, or any similar place where Sanskrit is spoken, consumes intoxicants, meat, or leads what is considered to be an *adharmic* (immoral) lifestyle. When I pointed out that a man sold beedis, cigarettes, and paan from his cart directly opposite the front gate, and that all day people were standing about smoking and chewing paan, it was treated as an error in perception on my part.

The other notion repeated ad nauseam was that everything good, right and proper in India today is a result of a Sanskritic worldview. Everything bad or wrong is a result of the British or Muslims. Answers to my questions regarding the provenance of such essential things like electricity, trains, modern medicine, were met with silence. Some of the heroes of Samskrita Bharati's pantheon include Swami Vivekananda, Shivaji Maharaj, Subhash Chandra Bose, and Rani Lakshmi Bai. They are worshipped as ideal patriots who fought foreign invaders. Their images are used during lessons to differentiate between grammatical concepts of gender and the use of pronouns related to proximity to the speaker. The teacher would stand next to a picture of Vivekananda and say: "*Sah kah?... Sah deshabhaktah*; Who is he?... He is a patriot." Then, perhaps, she would turn to the picture of Rani Lakshmi Bai and ask "*Saa kaa... Saa viiryaa*; Who is she?... She is a heroine." Not only were the images of these figures used to teach Sanskrit, they were also meant to instill in students a patriotic ideology. The famous picture of a young Vivekananda confidently standing with crossed arms adorns almost every room in the building. He is joined by an image of Bharat Mata (Mother India), cut asunder, torn apart and bleeding because of Partition. Vivekananda said, "the only condition of national life, of awakened and vigorous national life, is the conquest of the world by Indian thought". Samskrita Bharati holds such a statement as paramount.

There are two ways that a Sanskrit utterance can be critiqued in the classroom: the first is grammatically, the second ideologically. I spent most of the time trying to construct sentences that would push the ideological boundary to its limits. Out of the 27 people attending the camp, only one student supported the Congress party. The rest were enthusiastic supporters of the BJP. I was at the camp during the lead up to the December 2013 Delhi elections and the Supreme Court's decision to uphold Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The news that the BJP had a sweeping victory in four states and that Sheila Dikshit had been ousted in Delhi was met with dancing and singing by everyone, except the Congress supporter. Many sentence-construction exercises involved poking fun at Congress and its leaders, especially Sonia Gandhi, while honouring Narendra Modi: "*BJP samyak asti Congress samyak naasti*; the BJP is good, Congress is not good"; "*Bhaaratadeshah samyak asti Sonya Gaandhih samyak naasti*; India is good, Sonia Gandhi is not good." I tried out: "*Brahmanah harijanaaya iirshyati*, the Brahmin is jealous of the Harijan." I wanted to see whether reversing the social hierarchy would be controversial, as we were constantly told that an egalitarian ethos was at the heart of the mission. However, my sentence was met with complete horror by just about everyone in the room. I was asked to offer an alternative sentence and retract the original. It seems that even though Sanskrit is apparently a 'people's language', a hierarchy of purity based on caste is still maintained. As a response to my 'abhorrent' utterance and also as a way to diffuse the rather tense atmosphere that it generated, the teacher explained how because "everyone comes from God (Hari)" we are all able to consider ourselves Harijans (born of God). If we accept this logic, then, we find ourselves at a tricky cultural intersection where the struggles of India's impoverished and less fortunate are likely to be sanitised by the power of Sanskrit and the ideologues that promote it.

I was horrified when, on a covert trip to the office to read the daily Hindi newspaper, I learnt of the upholding of Section 377. I asked around the compound what they thought of people being either harassed or jailed for simply being themselves and engaging in consensual sexual relations in the privacy of their homes. Either people refused to comment, thinking the question absurd ("*eshah vishayah samyak naasti*; this topic is not good") or they enthusiastically supported the incarceration of *samlaingikaah* (homosexuals), referring to the judgment as "*avashya*; necessary" by citing the tiresome concept that because homosexual intercourse precludes reproduction, it must be 'unnatural' and, therefore, immoral.

Of course, within any conservative cultural paradigm many activities, dispositions and thoughts quickly become taboo. Even though the rhetoric used by such cultural thought-police as Samskrita Bharati is subtle, it represents a monolingual and monocultural hegemony bereft of sympathy for or interest in Southasian cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. The imposition of their ‘tolerant’ and ‘harmonious’ goals result from adopting the Sangh’s moral and linguistic initiatives whose symbolic power comes through the sanitising effects of Sanskrit. Therefore, the type of person found speaking Sanskrit generally seems to hold conservative and intolerant views towards multiculturalism and modernity, and is rooted in the ideology of Hindutva. This is problematic for the 99.99875 percent of India’s population who don’t speak Sanskrit and also, perhaps, don’t want to be sanitised in the way the Sangh would like them to be. The ‘intangible heritage’ found within the Sanskrit literary canon is a valuable body of knowledge that UNESCO believes should not be lost to humanity. It belongs to all of us, not just fascist ideologues with an agenda.

~Patrick McCartney is a PhD student at the Australian National University, Canberra. His research focuses on the manufacturing of legitimacy within a conservative Hindu organisation and its relationship to the nationalist project.

- To buy online [Click Here](#)
- For a list of retailers [Click Here](#)
-
-
-
-
-
-



Himal Testimonials

“Himal Southasian is an indispensable resource for scholars in Southasian Studies, and among the few Asian magazines that are reliable and exhaustive enough to serve as full-fledged scholarly references. One reason for this is that the editors maintain permanent contact with the academic world.”

- **Philippe Ramirez**
 Researcher, Centre for Himalayan Studies
 CNRS-Paris

