*Invited Article*

# Sanskrit and Society

Sudhir Lall[*]
Head, Kalakosa, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi 110001
[*]Correspondence: sudhirlall@gmail.com

Sanskrit and Society - both these terms have multiple layers of meanings and in the following lines, an attempt is being made to unravel these layers. A pertinent question to be kept in mind would be -- can there be a society without a language, or a language without a society.

Maitreyi College is one of the most distinguished educational institutions of the University of Delhi. The legend of Maitreyi can be traced back to the Brihadaryanka Upanishad, and is recounted here, briefly -- Sage Yajnavalkya had two wives, Maitreyi and Katyayani. The former is revered as a 'Brahmavadini'[1] as she would discuss the matters related to Brahman (or the supreme reality) with Yajnavalkya; while the latter had a more practical viewpoint of the world. One day the sage Yajnavalkya decided to embrace the next Ashram of his life by means of forsaking his house, and while at that, he sought permission to leave from Maitreyi. He tells her that whatever riches there are, may be distributed amongst both the wives. Maitreyi asks him, 'Sir, if indeed this whole earth full of wealth be mine, shall I be immortal through that, or not?' 'No,' replies Yajnavalkya and states, 'your life will be just like that of people who have plenty of things, but there is no hope of immortality through wealth.'[2]

Maitreyi then tells him that she would like to know the ways and means to attain immortality or a redemption from the cycle of births and deaths – "*yenaham namrita syam kimaham tena kuryam.*" The Sage is pleased with her request and imparts to her what is commended as the essence of the Upanishadic teaching; "*atma va are drastavyah srotavyo mantavyo nididhyasitavyo maitreyi atmani khalvare driste srute mate vijnyata idam sarvam viditam,*" that is, to know one's true nature, it is imperative to know one's own Self. Sage Yajnavalkya declares to Maitreyi, "True understanding unfolds through sequential contemplation; one has to have an initial scriptural guidance, followed by rational reflection, and profound meditation, and thus is revealed the ultimate truth – the Self alone exists."[3]

This Upanishadic episode is narrated here to celebrate the memory of the great woman sage (Maitreyi) whose profound enquiry prompted the erudite sage Yajnavalkya to impart the seed of ultimate wisdom. Alongside being the worthy recipient of supreme knowledge, she also represents the tradition of inquiry, which is a part and parcel of the Indic knowledge system,

---

[1] The term Brahmavadin is defined in the traditional dictionaries as -- "ब्र(व्र)ह्मवादिन्" -- पु॰ ब्रह्म वेदं वदति पठति वद--णिनि। in the Vachaspatyam, and as 'वेदान्तशास्त्रज्ञः' in the (*Amarkosha*, 2|7|6|3|4), with वेदान्तिन्, ब्रह्मवादिन् as synonyms.

[2] नेति होवाच याज्ञवल्क्यो यथैवोपकरणवतां जीवितं तथैव ते जीवितंस्यादमृतत्वस्य तु नाशास्ति वित्तेनेति। (*Brihadaryanka Upanishad*, 2/4/2)

[3] *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4/5/6

which has come down through the language called Sanskrit, about which the present discussion is centred on.

There is a close connection between society and language. The word society is etymologised from the Latin *societas* or *societatem* meaning fellowship, association, union or community), and it is from the proto-Indo European *sokʷ-yo- ("companion"), which has a cognate in Sanskrit 'Sakha,' which has the same meaning. Another word that could be taken as its prime ingredient is 'Community' (*Communis* from a combination of the Latin prefix *con-* (together) and *munis* (performing services; vide munis>municipality etc.), and both of these comprise a group of "individuals" (Latin 'in-' meaning 'not; opposite of,' and 'dividuus' meaning 'divisible,' which stems itself from 'dividere' meaning 'divide'), who share a common locality, interests, values, and goals. A group of individuals is a community and a group of communities form a society. Here, another interesting word which may be relevant is "Communication" (Latin *communicare*, which means 'to share' or 'to make common'). So, the common thread between community and communication can be clearly noted as both indicate a sense of sharing and commonality. Both nourish each other -- the community expresses itself through language and the language in turn, lends its support in establishing the communication between the individuals of a society. This brief discussion on these concepts demonstrates that there exist a strong and inherent bond between the language and the society; where the language, on the one hand, helps in shaping the society, and on the other, the society enriches the language.

Language plays a vital role in transmitting culture and values, influencing our consciousness and shaping our attitudes. Sanskrit is no exception, and it has been instrumental in conveying not only India's prescriptive values and sophisticated concepts, but also the well-formed value system that has been the governing principle of India -- the four main objectives of one's life (the *purushartha*) – *dharma, artha, kama,* and *moksha.*[4] These four life goals are traditionally interrelated -- the *artha* or economics, and the *kama* or the material worlds, should be governed by *dharma*; a set of principles, which ultimately enable us to attain *moksha*, or, a liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. These thematically interwoven concepts are expressed in the Sanskrit language; the very word Sanskrit means 'adorned' or 'cultivated.' In essence, Sanskrit is inextricably linked to Indian culture (Bharatiya Sanskriti).

It may also be highlighted here that the framework of any language has some inherent flexibility, owing to which it modifies itself from time to time, keeping in view, the space, time, and circumstances. It may move towards simplicity, or complexity, or refinement, according to the requirements of the society. In turn, it replenishes the society by way of securing the ancient most ideas of a civilisation and through, as if, an auto-renewal mechanism, keeps the notions relevant. The language of this part of the world, that is, India, has been Sanskrit as has been evidenced by the presence of the Vedic tradition, which has been inscribed by the UNESCO as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Humankind. Sanskrit is not just a language but a civilisation in itself, distinguished by its role as the propounder, preserver, and expressor of the most ancient yet most modern ideas that define Indian knowledge traditions and culture. It is a sacred, eternal thread woven through the tapestry of countless manuscripts, daily chants, and ceremonial recitations.

The Vedic proclamation "*ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*"[5] or "The Supreme Reality is one; but is perceived in different forms by different experts" presumes that knowledge in the

---

[4]  धर्मे चार्थे च कामे च मोक्षे च भरतर्षभ।
 यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यन्नेहास्ति न कुत्रचित्॥ (*Mahabharata*, 18/5/50)

[5]  एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्त्यग्निं यमं मातरिश्वानमाहुः। (*Rgveda*, 1/164/46)

Indian context is eternal, everlasting, and has an underlying thread of non-duality. This belief also underlines the notion that the microcosm and macrocosm are composed of the same elements and this ideological continuum is enshrined in and expressed throughout the Vedic corpus and other genres of Sanskrit literature.

There can be three visible traditions that showcase the importance, relevance and continuity of Sanskrit as a language – the oral tradition (the Vedic tradition, as well as the traditions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata), the written tradition, which can be gleaned through the rich tradition of Sanskrit manuscripts in India and abroad; and the performative tradition, which comprise the various traditions of artistic expressions, or the Kala, -- the theatre, music, dance and painting traditions etc.

A story from the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* (Part III; Chapter 1-118)[6] which is recorded in the form of a long discourse between King Vajra and the sage Markandeya, is recounted here to illustrate the interconnectedness of the Indian knowledge systems. The king seeks to create icons (*devata rupa nirmanam*) for worshiping deities in their proper form. The sage responds that a proper understanding of principles of icon-making requires a proficiency in the art of painting (*chitra sutra*). Keen to learn painting, the king discovers he must first master dance (*nritta shastra*). The sage then advises that dance training necessitates prior expertise in instrumental music (*aatodya*). The king requests instrumental music be taught to him but is told that a mastery over the vocal music (*gita*) precedes proficiency in instrumental music. To excel in vocal music, one must be well-versed in literature (*patha*). Thus, the sage guides the king through a training of all these arts before imparting to him the art of iconography. This story highlights the complementarity and interconnectedness of Indian arts at a conceptual level. Without the knowledge of one, the other remains incomplete. It may be underlined here that while the aforesaid streams of knowledge maintain their autonomy, their intrinsic interrelatedness is always respected.

Sanskrit as a language is an extremely important and huge corpus of knowledge. Just to present some statistics, there are about 22,000 mantras in the four Vedic Samhitas, 24,000 shlokas in the Valmiki Ramayana, 1,00,000 (1 lakh) shlokas in the Mahabharata of Veda Vyasa (more than seven times the size of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined), about 5 lakh shlokas in the 18 Mahapurana-s, and approximately the same number in the Upa-Purana-s, and this all, is followed by a continued literary tradition which has been extremely fertile in

---

6    चित्रसूत्रं न जानाति यस्तु सम्यङ् नराधिप।
     प्रतिमालक्षणं वेत्तु न शक्य तेन कर्हिचित् ॥
     चित्रसूत्रं समाचक्ष्व भृगुवंशविवर्धन ।
     चित्रसूत्रविदेवाथ वेत्त्यर्चालक्षणं यतः ॥
     विना तु नृत्तशास्त्रेण चित्रसूत्र सुदुर्विदम्।
     जगतोऽनुक्रिया कार्या द्वयोरपि यतो नृप ॥
     नृत्तशास्त्रं समाचक्ष्व चित्रसूत्रं वदिष्यसि ।
     नृत्तशास्त्र विधानज्ञश्चित्रं वेत्ति यतो द्विज ॥
     आतोद्यं यो न जानाति तस्य नृत्तं सुदुर्विदम्।
     आतोद्येन विना नृत्तं विद्यते न कथञ्चन ॥
     आतोद्यं ब्रूहि धर्मज्ञ नृत्तशास्त्र वदिष्यसि ।
     तस्मिन्सुविदिते वेत्ति नृत्तं भार्गवसत्तम ॥
     न गीतेन विना शक्यं ज्ञातुमातोद्यमुच्यत ।
     गीतशास्त्रविधानज्ञ सर्वं वेत्ति यथाविधि ॥
     गीतशास्त्रं समाचक्ष्व सर्वधर्मभृतां वर ।
     गीतशास्त्रविदेवाथ सर्वज्ञ पुरुषोत्तम ॥ (*Vishnudharmottara Purana*, 3/2/2-9)

expression. The Agama-s, the Dharmashastra-s, the numerous disciplines of Darshana-s or philosophy, and their exegetical texts, texts on disciplines like metallurgy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and in streams like architecture, iconography, sculpture, painting, dance, music (both instrumental and vocal) along with the classical Sanskrit literature comprising epics, poems, lyrical songs, novels, narrative literature and dramas; so much of literature has been produced in this language that it would be a challenging task to offer even a ballpark figure of its extent.

Although the scholars have divergent views on the origin and development of the language, this is for sure that this language has been an integral part of the Indic civilisation. It has two broad categories – the Vedic and the Classical. There are some linguistic features that demarcate the two, but it is generally agreed that the Sanskrit that is present before us today has the Vedic Sanskrit as its basis. Interestingly, not much has changed in the classical Sanskrit and this linguist magic about this phenomenal language can be ascribed to a genius named Panini, who scholars generally agree, belonged to fourth century BCE. He composed a text called the *Ashtadhyayi* (lit. - eight chapters), and systematised the whole corpus present before him in about four thousand aphorisms (*sutra*), which became governing principles for the users of the language. With a framework comprising three persons (first, second, and third), three numerical forms (singular, dual, and plural), three voices (active, middle, and passive), three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter), eight cases (nominative, vocative, accusative, instrumental, dative, ablative, genitive, and locative), and ten tenses; Sanskrit offers endless scope to its users to express the most complex ideas in their entire intricacy. So much like other streams of knowledge, the grammatical tradition of Sanskrit kept growing by leaps and bounds and a huge number of technical commentaries were composed by numerous grammarians – Maharshi Katyayana composed *Vartika* on Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, and Maharshi Patanjali composed the famous *Mahabhashya*, and together with Panini, these three acharyas are revered as the Trimuni of Sanskrit grammar. They toiled to make the Sanskrit language more elegant and accessible, allowing society to stay connected with it.

The entire corpus of the Sanskrit literature is a vast treasure of societal norms and value system. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the histories of Indian civilisation, not mythologies; and these two serve as a fountainhead of most of the Indic literature. Even in Indian aesthetics, "*raamadi vat vartitavyam na tu raavan adi vat*"[7] (act like Rama, and not like Ravana) is a driving principle. Both the epics are standard texts that continue to be an integral part of the Indic mindscape, and these continually provide the moral and ethical compass to the society by means of retellings and recreations – for example, the *Rama Charitmanas* of Gosvami Tulasidasa. Sanskrit narrative literature boasts an unparalleled richness, leading to the notion that India was the birthplace of all folktales. Indeed, many have originated from India and have been incorporated into renowned works like *The Arabian Nights*, Boccaccio's *Decameron,* Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales,* and Jean de La Fontaine's Fables. The *Pancatantra* of Vishnu Sharma composed in about 4th -5th CE has had a profound impact. This ancient text, framed as a political guide for young princes, features animal characters that teach invaluable lessons for achieving worldly success. The *Hitopadesa* by Narayana, a shorter adaptation of the *Pancatantra*, offers similar wisdom. The influence of the text of the *Pancatantra* has been far-reaching, with translations in Persian, Arabic, Syrian, Hebrew, and Latin, making it a staple in medieval literatures worldwide. Its migration to Southeast Asia and East Asia has been equally extensive. As "the most frequently translated literary product of India," the *Pancatantra'*s stories are universally recognised, with versions in nearly every major Indian language and over 200 adaptations in more than 50 languages

---

[7]     रामादिवद् वर्तितव्यं न तु रावणादिवत्। (*Kavya Prakasha*, 1/ 2)

globally. Recently, in the year 2024, this text has been inscribed in the Regional Register of the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme.

Sanskrit drama is similarly regarded as a faithful reflection of society, offering a genuine portrayal of the human experience, and serving as a window into the culture and values of its time. As a poetic genre with an audio-visual dimension, it draws inspiration from societal dynamics and aims to effect positive change, embodying refinement and sophistication. The drama, born from personal, familial, and social themes, offers an artistic portrayal of both worldly and otherworldly experiences. There is a story which describes the origin of the *Natyashastra*, recorded in its very first chapter, which can be paraphrased as follows -- As humans on earth became increasingly consumed by negative emotions like excessive desire, greed, jealousy, and anger, their happiness became intertwined with sorrow. In response, the devas, led by Indra, appealed to Brahma, the creator deity, for a universal form of entertainment that would be both visual and auditory -- "*kridaniyakam icchamo drsyam sravyam ca yad bhavet*"[8]. They requested that this entertainment be accessible to all people, of all categories. This reflects the timeless human need for respite from a world filled with conflicting emotions. The following five verses speak about the creation of the *Natyashastra*[9] by Brahma:

धर्म्यमर्थ्यं यशस्यं च सोपदेश्यं ससङ्ग्रहम् ।भविष्यतश्च लोकस्य सर्वकर्मानुदर्शकम् ॥

सर्वशास्त्रार्थसंपन्नं सर्वशिल्पप्रवर्तकम् । नाट्याख्यं पञ्चमवेदं सेतिहासं करोम्यहम् ॥

एवं सङ्कल्प्य भगवान् सर्ववेदाननुस्मरन् । नाट्यवेदं ततश्चक्रे चतुर्वेदाङ्गसम्भवम् ॥

जग्राह पाठ्यमृग्वेदात्सामभ्यो गीतमेव च । यजुर्वेदादभिनयान् रसानाथर्वणादपि ॥

वेदोपवेदैः सम्बद्धो नाट्यवेदो महात्मना । एवं भगवता सृष्टो ब्रह्मणा सर्ववेदिना ॥

Meaning -- It will comprise wise advice for general public enabling them to pursue their dharma, as well as their mundane requirements. It will become a beacon of light for generations to come. It will be infused with the essence of all the shastra-s and will serve as the substratum for all the arts. I shall create the fifth Veda, i.e., the *Natyaveda*, along with *itihasa*-s. Thus, he created the *Natyaveda*, with the four Vedas as its basis –

He took the lyrics (*pathya*) from the *Rigveda*, the music (*gita*) from the *Samaveda*, the language of gestures (*abhinaya*) from the *Yajurveda* and the aesthetic experience (*rasa*) from the *Atharvaveda*.

One can trace a sequence of amazing ideas and lucid expressions in the journey of Sanskrit through almost all literary traditions, from the Vedic period to the present day. These ideas have complemented Indian society, and it is necessary to understand the significance of the role of Sanskrit in the formation and transformation of Indian society. The Sanskrit theatre exemplifies this notion perfectly. It is a comprehensive and inclusive art form that captures nearly every facet of life, ranging from the mundane to the metaphysical, and from compassion to tranquillity. By depicting the human and the divine, it reflects society in all its diverse dimensions. Sanskrit theatre offers a grand platform for expressing and celebrating this diversity, showcasing its broad scope and holistic nature. This has been a continuous tradition in India and the performing arts such as the *Chau, Kudiyattam, Sattriya, Manipuri, and Bhand Pather* etc., have been responsible in keeping the Sanskrit theatre alive.

The relevance of Sanskrit has been recognised by the modern-day academia and collective adoration for this sonorous language continues to attract attention. Perhaps, that is the reason

---

[8]     क्रीडनीयकमिच्छामो दृश्यं श्रव्यं च यद्भवेत् (*Natyashastra*, 1/11)

[9]     *Natyashastra*, 1/14-18

why, there are more than 60 academic, political, judicial, and governmental institutions which have Sanskrit phrases as their motto –

1. Government of India – *satyameva jayate*
2. Lok Sabha – *dharma chakra pravartanaya*
3. Supreme Court of India – *yato dharmas tato jayah*
4. All India Radio – *sarva jana hitaya sarva jana sukhaya*
5. LIC – *yogakshemam vahamyaham*
6. India Post – *aharnisham sevamahe*
7. Indian Air Force – *nabhasparsham diptam*
8. Benaras Hindu University – *vidyaya amritamashnute*
9. Kendriya Vidyalaya – *tat tvam pushan apavrinu*
10. University of Delhi – *nishtha dhritih satyam*
11. All India Institute of Medical Sciences – *sariramadyam khali dharma sadhanam*
12. IIT-Kanpur – *tamaso ma jyotirgamaya* etc…

The All India Radio, the national broadcaster has been airing the Sanskrit daily news; the Doordarshan, the official Television broadcaster of India instituted the Sanskrit news, and a weekly magazine program in Sanskrit. There are about 18 Sanskrit Universities in India and dedicated Sanskrit departments throughout the world, which impart the knowledge of Sanskrit as a language. Also, there are about five villages in India which are called the Sanskrit villages – Mattur, and Hosa Halli (both in Karnataka), Jhiri (Madhya Pradesh), Jharonda (Rajasthan), and Sasana (Odisha).

As an endnote, the words of Sir William Jones may be quoted – "*The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have spring from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtick, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit, and the old Persian might be added to this family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of Persia.*" (Jones, 1807, p. 34).

An attempt has been made to map the breadth and beauty of Sanskrit literary and artistic traditions, and also to demonstrate how this profound and remarkable language has both drawn inspiration from and impacted the Indian society.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

**REFERENCES**

Jones, S. W. (1807). The Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus, Delivered 2nd of February, 1786. In L. Teignmouth (Ed.), *The Works of Sir William Jones* (Vol. III, pp. 24-46). London: John Stockdale, Piccadilly.

Panshikar, V. L. (Ed.). (1912). *Amarkosha of Amar Singh.* Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press.

Poddar, H. P. (Ed.). (2014). *Brihadaryanka Upanishad.* Gorakhpur: Gitapress.

Poddar, H. P. (Ed.). (2017). *Mahabharata.* Gorakhpur: Gitapress.

Satvalekar, S. D. (Ed.). (n.d.). *The Rgveda Samhita.* Pardi: Svadhyaya Mandala.

Shah, P. (Ed.). (1958). *The Vishnudharmottara Purana.* Baroda: Oriental Institute.

Shastri, M. O. (Ed.). (1971). *The Natyashastra of Bharatamuni.* Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University.

Vishveshwar, A. (Ed.). (2023). *Kavya Prakasha of Mammata.* Varanasi: Chaukhamba Surbharati Prakashan.