

The case for Sanskrit



The Indian deity Hayagriva: "The study of Sanskrit is the study of Indian civilization."

Richard Gombrich defends a subject
whose place in the modern
university has recently come under attack

A while ago Lord Stokes, then Sir Donald, spoke of "too many undergraduates taking arts courses and then doing a thesis on Sanskrit instead of teaching people the art of modern management". Alas, there were then—and there are now—only about a dozen British students "doing a thesis on Sanskrit"; excellent people but hardly enough to cripple modern management in this country.

May modern managers flourish! I would certainly not compel them to study Sanskrit. However, I have been invited to justify a subject which has apparently become a by-word for futility. What do Sanskritists do, and should it be allowed, let alone subsidized by the taxpayer?

To make the case for Sanskrit is to make the case for the humanities. For the study of Sanskrit is the study of Indian civilization. Does even this require a defence? Perhaps it does.

The study of cultures, now most commonly appropriated by anthropology, recognizes the educative value of studying human diversity. The necessarily complementary study of what all societies have in common may be edifying, but is less enlightening.

In the study of civilization, of the systematic thoughts and artistic achievements of a culture—a study which must depend mainly on written records—we hope to achieve an appreciation of the complexity and variety of human experience. There are no bounds to this complexity; but there are limits to the variety to be found within one civilization.

The search for this understanding, and for the cultivation of a many-sided sympathy, begins best at home, with materials drawn from our own civilization, if we still have any: it is not much use learning about Polynesian traditions if you have never become aware of your own, and certainly there is no point in reading a Sanskrit play if you have never thought about an English one.

Given, therefore, that we must begin by acquiring some appreciation of the achievements of our own civilization, we may then go further afield because, as the saw has it, travel broadens the mind.

We travel both to acquire objects of comparison with our own civilization—which will be helpful if we wish to form any general theories about humanity—and to appreciate the products of the foreign civilizations in their own right.

The former aim is now institutionally realized in university disciplines called "comparative" (comp lit, comp linguistics, comp rel, and so on), but its pursuit may also illuminate good old-fashioned studies like classics and history; the latter serves to enrich our lives, and I shall suggest that this has a socio-political as well as a hedonistic value.

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This is all very general and, I hope, obvious. Why then Indian? Because the Indian is one of the world's great civilizations, great both quantitatively and qualitatively. Civilization in India is considerably older, but the earlier civilization is discontinuous with that which has dominated India for the last 3,500 years.

In this period India has been rich, to put it mildly, in interesting ideas, and in beautiful works of literature, music and art, and these ideas and works are mainly accessible through Sanskrit. Sanskrit has been the main language of Indian civilization.

To claim that we can understand a foreign culture without learning its language is just not good enough. To see that this is so, we need only consider what we think of a foreigner who claims to know about us but speaks not a word of English. How subtle an understanding are we willing to accord him? For how much sympathy do we give him credit?

Anthropologists of course recognize that they had better talk to the villagers or tribesmen in their own languages; and the majority of the small number of British university teachers who can manage an Indian language are probably in anthropology faculties.

They have learnt what they need, as a missionary pupil of mine used to say, “for their own purposes”. But who can communicate with *educated* Indians?

We take it for granted that an educated Indian—or Russian, or Japanese—who is interested in England, even if he is not an academic, has at least some first-hand acquaintance with the Bible and Shakespeare; at the worst, he *could* look into them. But how many Britons can read the Upanishads or Kalidasa, India's Shakespeare?

Perhaps India's salient characteristic now is her poverty. She has attracted the interest of economists and of other academics who hope to mitigate human suffering, and that is entirely laudable.

But what would we, a civilized people, think of another civilized people whose interest in us was confined to our family structure, our economy and our hygiene—to our nature as animals, albeit social animals? Do we deserve consideration on no loftier plane?

It is here that the argument for Sanskrit transcends individual hedonism and reaches political utility. India may be poor, notably in mineral resources, but is she not worth taking seriously?

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The Indian sub-continent is comparable in size and diversity to Europe. But Sanskrit civilization has given it much the kind and degree of cultural unity which has been given to Europe by Christianity.

Sanskrit has been associated with a social system (known to us as the “caste system”), and with a congeries of beliefs and practices which we nowadays call Hinduism, an uninformative term which just means “Indianism”. (Both Hindu and India derive from *sindhu*, the Sanskrit word for river, and in particular “the” river, the Indus (same word again) which flows through the Punjab.)

India now contains two other great civilizations: the Indo-Muslim, of which the main linguistic vehicle was first Persian and then Urdu, and the western, mainly conveyed through English. These two civilizations, associated with Islam and with Christianity respectively, are comparatively recent imports, but neither has remained unaffected by the indigenous caste system.

Speakers of an early form of Sanskrit entered India from the north-west, and settled in the Punjab about 1500 BC. They gradually moved east and south, but it took more than a thousand years for their culture to permeate Bengal, and still longer for it to reach south India.

Their scriptures, which have survived, were in Sanskrit. Their perfect preservation, which began long before the introduction of writing, was the particular task of a hereditary priestly class, the brahmins.

Repositories of the sacred tradition, the brahmins advised rulers how society should be organized; whether or not the rulers followed their advice, they preserved the ideals. The spread of Sanskrit civilization meant, in human terms, the spread of the brahmins and the acculturation of others to their norms. This process has gone on throughout Indian history and is still incomplete.

In about the fourth century BC, a great grammarian, Panini, codified the Sanskrit language. His description applies mainly to the language of scriptures already old in his day, but also refers to Sanskrit as spoken, probably by brahmins, around him.

Whether even Panini's brahmin contemporaries used Sanskrit for all purposes is doubtful. By that time the vernacular had greatly changed from Sanskrit. The term Sanskrit means “the elaborated”; the languages first derived from it were Prakrits (“common” or “natural” languages); linguists now call the two Old Indo-Aryan and Middle Indo-Aryan respectively.

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vive, inscriptions of the Emperor Asoka (269-232 BC) are in Prakrit. More than a millennium later the modern languages of northern India (Modern Indo-Aryan) began to develop; Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Hindi, and so on.

Some of these have many Persian loan-words, but they are closely related to Sanskrit, much as the European Romance languages are to Latin. Sinhala, the national language of Ceylon, is also Indo-Aryan. On the other hand the other languages of India, of which the largest group is Dravidian (Tamil, and so on) have so many loan-words from Indo-Aryan that a knowledge of Sanskrit is a great help to learning them.

The Sanskrit codified by Panini has hardly changed from his day to this, and in that sense it is not a living language. It is probably no one's first language (though in the census reports a few brahmins so claim it); its role is analogous to that of Latin in medieval Europe.

The language has had its ups and downs. Rebellious against Vedic religion and brahmin dominance, religious reformers such as the Buddha and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, both of whom were preaching in 500 BC, used the local languages for all purposes, and for several centuries Buddhists and Jains composed and preserved their scriptures in Prakrits. (The Buddhist Prakrit in which their whole canon has been preserved is known as Pali.)

In this period, the half millennium before Christ, arose the two great Sanskrit epics, one of which is eight times the length of Homer. But the great age of Sanskrit imaginative literature—especially poetry and drama—began only in about the second century AD and lasted roughly a millennium.

For even longer, Sanskrit was the main vehicle of Indian science (mathematics, astronomy, medicine, etc), philosophy, religion, law and works on art and music. During the period of Muslim and then European dominance its use was more circumscribed.

In modern times it has been largely replaced by the modern Indian languages and even by English; but there are Sanskrit newspapers, periodicals and literary productions even now. Sanskrit provides the intellectual background to most of modern Indian culture.

So much for Sanskrit as a medium. But it was as a language in its own right that Sanskrit first caught the interest of the west. In 1786 Sir William Jones discovered that Sanskrit bore to Latin and Greek “a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists”.

This was a landmark in the history of European learning and marked the birth of com-

times over that surviving in Sanskrit, but yet only a fraction of it, maybe a tenth, has even been published, and only a minute fraction of that fraction has been critically edited.

Most Sanskrit texts are still only available in manuscript, and the conservation of manuscripts in the Indian climate requires money and attention which the country's economic plight simply does not seem to provide. Yet even in British libraries there lie several thousand uncatalogued manuscripts, with no funds to pay for a cataloguer.

To attempt to save the hundreds of thousands of manuscripts in India seems impossibly expensive; at best we can hope to photograph important manuscripts and other antiquities before they disappear.

Preservation must have top priority. Next, for the west, comes exegesis. The *Rig-Veda*, India's oldest scripture, still does not have an English translation which would pass muster in the fifth form. The beauties of Sanskrit poetry and drama are hard to convey in translation; but few translations are even readable and India has yet to find her Waley.

Translation is laborious, but it is essential, and not only in order to reach the general educated public. Indian work on technical subjects has only been accessible to scholars who can read the texts; for example, Indian philosophy has been left to Sanskritists, hardly touched by philosophers.

Few specialists on other disciplines will bother to learn Sanskrit until they are shown that it will be worth their while. But until they do, the study of Indian culture in this country will be left to rank amateurs.

There are at the moment in Britain less than 10 university posts in Sanskrit; a full BA course in Sanskrit is taught at only four universities. As it is rarely mentioned in schools, hardly any students arrive at university intending to study Sanskrit; they generally find out about it at university and change to it.

As it is virtually impossible in Britain for a student to change university in mid-course, it would be fatal to reduce the number of universities at which it is available. Yet departments of two or three teachers are also in their way absurd; imagine having to teach the whole of French language and culture from scratch with a staff of two.

Superficiality in many areas is inevitable. Like most of their orientalist colleagues, Sanskrit teachers have to spend such a high proportion of their time on elementary language teaching that their research is severely hampered.

Within Indology, specialists cannot find jobs, or must abandon their specialisms, because such small departments require only jack-of-all-trades. Graduate seminars in the field are a rarity. There are several fine libraries, but they are sadly under-used. A cost-effective-minded modern manager might recommend expansion.

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