

# Relevance of Sanskrit

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Whether or not there is relevance of Sanskrit can be understood from the fact that by perusing very little of the vast literature in this language, and that too through second hand translations from Portuguese, English and French, the Germans discovered their racial, linguistic and cultural link with the Aryans of antiquity. A Tamil Brahmin translated in Portuguese for a Dutch Christian preacher some proverbs from Bhartrihari and the Dutch published this in his work, *Open Door to the Hidden Heathendom* in 1651. A German translation of the book appeared in 1663. In 1699 a Jesuit came to India, studied Sanskrit for 30 years and then wrote his *Grammatica Granthamia seu Samscridumica* which is the first Sanskrit Grammar for the Europeans. This was not a printed book. An Austrian, who preached Christianity on the Malabar coast between 1776 and 1789, used "Grammatica" as the source book for his two books on Sanskrit Grammar besides two other major works on Brahmanical literature.

In 1773, Warren Hastings became the Governor-General of Bengal and was entrusted with the highest powers over the whole of the English possessions in India. He employed a number of Brahmins, well versed in *Smriti* and *Mimamsa Shastras*, who compiled for him the famous book, *Vivadarnabasetu* or *The Bridge over the Ocean of Disputes*, containing everything important about Hindu laws of inheritance, family etc. When this book in Sanskrit was completed no one could translate it directly into English and therefore it had to be translated into Persian and then from Persian to English, which was then printed and published at the expense of the East India Company in the year 1776 under the title *A Code of Gentoo Law*. "Gentio" is a Portuguese word meaning 'heathen', and the word, "Gentoo" is derived from 'gentio' to designate Hindu laws, in contradistinction to the Mohammedan. Warren Hastings also urged Charles Wilkins to learn Sanskrit directly from the Pundits in Benaras, the chief seat of Sanskrit learning. Wilkins did so and after years of close study published in 1785 an English translation of the philosophical poem, *Bhagavadgita*. In 1787 appeared his translation of *Hitopadesa*, and in 1795 an English rendering of the Shakuntala episode from the *Mahabharata*. Wilkins himself cast and carved Devnagari script for the first time in 1808. William Jones came to India in 1783 to take up the post of Chief Justice at Fort Williams. With the support from Warren Hastings he founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in January, 1784. In 1789, William Jones published his English translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* which was translated into German in 1791, almost instantly awakening the highest degree of enthusiasm of men like Herder and Goethe. In 1794, Sir William Jones' translation of Manu appeared under the title, *Institutes of Hindu Law or the Ordinance of Manu*. A German translation of the book appeared in 1797 in Weimar. It must be remembered that it was William Jones who first suggested genealogical connection of Sanskrit with Greek and Latin and its hypothetical connection with German, Celtic and Persian. Henry Thomas Colebrook carried on translation works from Sanskrit texts to greater height. In collaboration with a group of Indian scholars, Colebrook prepared and published in 1797 and 1798 in four volumes a book under the title,

*A Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions*. His essays on ancient Indian philosophy and religious life, on grammar, astronomy and arithmetic were indeed pioneering. His famous essay, *On the Vedas*, published in 1805, gave for the first time definite and reliable information about the *Vedas*. He edited translation of *Amarakosa* and other Sanskrit dictionaries, of the famous grammar of Panini, of the *Hitopadesa*, and of the epic poem, *Kiratarjuniya*. His personal collection of Sanskrit manuscripts, worth more than £10,000 at that time is currently a treasure of the Library of the India Office at London.

Among the Englishmen like Jones and Colebrook, who learnt Sanskrit about the close of the eighteenth century, was Alexander Hamilton. He was staying in Paris on his way home from India with his huge collection of Sanskrit manuscripts when suddenly hostilities broke out between France and England in 1802 and Napoleon issued a command by virtue of which he was detained in Paris. German romantic poet, Friedrich Schlegel, who was also in Paris at the same time came to know that Hamilton, a Sanskrit scholar, was staying there. German translation from Jones' English version of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* had already attracted German romanticists' attention and they felt themselves especially attracted to India. Friedrich Schlegel himself believed that from India one could expect the unfolding of the history of the primeval world which up till now is shrouded in darkness. No wonder, therefore, that Friedrich Schlegel at once seized the opportunity of learning Sanskrit from Alexander Hamilton. Not only did he learn Sanskrit from Hamilton but also he devoted the remaining years of his stay at Paris to the study of Sanskrit texts in the Paris Library which at that time contained about two hundred manuscripts, catalogued by Alexander Hamilton himself in 1807. As a result of these studies Friedrich Schlegel wrote a book about India and the Indian language, Sanskrit. This creation, with extensive translations of passages from the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagabadgita*, Manu's Law-Book and from the Sakuntala episode of the Mahabharata, at once made Schlegel the founder of Indian philology in Germany. These were the first direct translations from Sanskrit into German; for what had previously been known of Sanskrit literature in Germany, had been translated from English.

Friedrich's brother August Wilhelm von Schlegel went to Paris in the year 1814 to study Sanskrit from A L Chezy, the first Sanskrit Professor at the College de France. Wilhelm's extensive activity as a Sanskrit scholar produced editions of texts, translations and other philological works. When the newly founded University of Bonn opened Sanskrit, August Wilhelm was appointed Professor. His contribution included, besides philological essays on Sanskrit, a German edition of the *Bhagabadgita* with a Latin translation and an unfinished edition of the Ramayana. Franz Bopp began his studies of Sanskrit as a student of A L Chezy, the same teacher who taught August Wilhelm at the College de France in Paris. Bopp was a more thorough investigator and it was he who became the founder of a new science of Comparative Philology by means of his book, "Ueber das Conjugation-system der Sanskritprache". With rare skill he then singled out of the Mahabharata, the wonderful story of King Nala and his faithful wife Damayanti and made it universally accessible by means of a good Latin translation. This charming creation of Sanskrit poetic art almost instantly awakened interest, enthusiasm and love for Sanskrit. Wherever Sanskrit is taught

in the Universities in the West, it has now become a great tradition to select Bopp's rendering of the Nala-Damayanti-episode in the first book for the students. Bopp also translated other episodes from the Mahabharata into German. His Sanskrit Grammar (1827) and *Glossarium Sanscritum* (Berlin 1830) have done immense good for the promotion of Sanskrit in Germany.

Till the year 1830 classical Sanskrit literature in Europe in general and Germany in particular was limited to Kalidasa's "Sakuntala", "Bhagavadgita" etc. as enumerated above. The great and all-important province of Sanskrit literature, the *Vedas*, was almost entirely unknown. The first reliable information was given by Colebrook. In the 17th century Prince Dara Sikoh, son of Emperor Shah Jehan, translated the *Upanishad* into Persian. From Persian they were translated by a French scholar into Latin under the title, "Oupnek'hat". Although this translation was not good, yet this has become a historical document since the great German philosophers, Schelling and Schopenhauer, became enthusiastic about Indian Philosophy only after reading this translation of the *Upanishad*, which, Schopenhauer thought marked "the production of the highest human wisdom". In the years 1816-19, Raja Rammohun Roy translated a number of Upanishads into English from the original with the purpose of proving to the Christian theologians and missionaries whom he esteemed highly, that the best of that which they taught was already there in the Upanishads. Some of these translations possibly reached Germany from England. In 1838 the first eighth of the *Rgveda*, translated by Friedrich Rosen was published in London. This was the first serious attempt after Colebrook to unlock and unravel the mystery of mysteries, the *Vedas*, in Europe. Unfortunately, Rosen died at this stage and therefore his work remained incomplete. However, it was the great French orientalist, Eugene Burnouf, who laid the foundation of the study of the *Vedas* by gathering around him a circle of pupils who later opened for the Europeans the gateway to the *Vedas*. One of these pupils was Rudolf Roth whose book on the literature and history of the *Veda* was published in 1846. Another celebrated pupil of Burnouf was Friedrich Max Muller. Stimulated by Burnouf, Max Muller formed the project of publishing the hymns of the "Rgveda" with the commentaries of Sayana. This project took a long period, 1849 to 1875, to take shape. Meanwhile in 1861-63, Th. Aufrecht brought out his handy edition of the complete text of the hymns of the "Rgveda" in German.

The story is long. The point at issue is first by coming to know through translations of some sublime stories from Sanskrit texts, Europe as a whole and the Christian missionaries among them in particular who came to 'civilize' India realized that they had come across a much higher and robust civilization than their own. Secondly, reading stories of 'grace and love' from secondary sources and feeling an urge to delve deep into the language that keeps these treasures, the German romantic school, unlike the Cambridge school of history, believed that the root of their language and culture lies in the mother language of India, that is, in Sanskrit, that the Aryan race originated in and the Aryan civilization flourished from India. Thirdly, although Sanskrit spawned scores of languages which have now lost connection with the mainspring and grown independent, it lives on as a vigorous language, spoken as a high language in seminars and scholastic discussions as well as written also, producing learned journals and periodicals

across the globe. Although its relevance cannot be assessed in utilitarian terms, Sanskrit texts abound in aphorisms and quotable quotes that are as refreshing today as they were in ancient days when written. For example, in the *Ramayana* there is a reference to King Dasaratha's administration of public finance wherein it is said that like the Sun evaporating moisture from earth and ocean only to return them as rain, Dasaratha's exchequer was filled in only to spend for the people, otherwise, it is added, "to rebel is justified". In another episode it is narrated that when Rama, Sita and Lakshmana finally entered the forest unencumbered of the crowd following them from Ayodhya, the king of the forest received the trio with a basket containing fresh fruits and a sword and asked Rama to choose either the basket or the sword. Rama chose the basket of fruits, signifying *ahimsa*, that is, friendship with the forest-dwellers. This episode explains the eternal Indian wisdom that the forest belongs to the forest-dwellers, not to the Central or Provincial governments. To rebel against any move to oust the forest-dwellers from the forest or to deny them from enjoying the resources of the forest or to loot the resources forcibly and denude the forest—to rebel against all such activities is justified. □□□

**Reference :**

A History of Indian Literature, M Winternitz, Calcutta University, 1962.