

Must-do, can-do, will do? : Analysing the MHRD Vision for Sanskrit

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Sanskrit, as a document prepared by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) says, is not just a language, but the voice of India's soul and wisdom – the link between India's past and present. MHRD has prepared an ambitious ten year perspective plan indicating its vision and roadmap for the development of Sanskrit language. The plan, which is the result of deliberation of a Committee appointed for the purpose, reviews the current status of Sanskrit Education in India, makes recommendations for school education, higher education as well as traditional education – what it calls *Veda Vidya*.

The objectives before the Sanskrit roadmap committee was:

- To assess and review the present schemes for the development of Sanskrit and *Veda Vidya*;
- To study and suggest ways and means to bring qualitative change in Sanskrit education both in school and higher education;
- To suggest vision and an action plan for the development of Sanskrit in next ten years;
- To suggest measures to integrate Sanskrit studies with other disciplines like Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Medical Science and Law etc.; and
- To suggest ways and means to use new methods of imparting Sanskrit education with the help of modern tools and technologies.

Classical – yes, but what do proponents and opponents say?

It is a fact that Sanskrit has long ceased to be a language of communication for the common man across India. For a long time now, it is being treated as a classical language, more ornamental than useful in the modern context. Howsoever much the Centre, especially in the present set up, wants us to believe otherwise. It is sometimes being attempted to be used as a vehicle for Hindutva by vested interests, and its link with the past of India is being emphasised again and again by both the proponents and opponents of the language. The proponents want to promote the language to instil pride in the minds of people about what they view as India's glorious past and its superior (read Hindu) culture, of India's advancements in science and philosophy till the seventh century AD, of which Sanskrit was the carrier. While the opponents blame Sanskrit for all the ills that afflict India – its Vedic culture and traditions, especially the obnoxious caste system and the consequent suppression

of those castes considered lower in traditional hierarchies in the country. Both sides forget that a language is just a vehicle for communication, and its richness depends on how people adopt and adapt to it. It has nothing to do with creating and perpetuating inequity and social injustice; that depends on the existing social hierarchies, power-structure and stratification in society. But in the process, the word Sanskrit, being associated with liturgy and religion, has been turned into a communal word by both sides. The debate on whether it is a dead language or living also rages on unsettled.

Prof. Sheldon Pollock, the Indic scholar of Sanskrit at Columbia University had compared Sanskrit with Latin: *“Both died slowly, and earliest as a vehicle of literary expression, while much longer retaining significance for learned discourse with its universalist claims. Both were subject to periodic renewals or forced rebirths, sometimes in connection with a politics of trans local aspiration... At the same time... both came to be ever more exclusively associated with narrow forms of religion and priestcraft, despite centuries of a secular aesthetic.”* But whether Sanskrit is really dead remains the subject of a never-ending debate.

Decline of Sanskrit during the Raj

The MHRD vision document also identifies that to become a living language, the primary prerequisite is to have adequate number of speakers of that tongue, existence of adequate number of books, texts and research articles on various subjects as well as contemporary literature in that language and its usability as a medium of instruction, entertainment and administration. Other essential attributes like continuous process of word generation, adaptation of technology and adequate patronage. Once these are in place, no doubt, employment opportunities through the learning of that language will open up.

MHRD must be complemented for at least having attempted to identify the real issues and for the first time perhaps to address these issues systematically over the long term. It correctly identifies the British rule as the watershed for the decline of Sanskrit education in India. Before that, India had been ruled by Muslim rulers for more than a thousand years, and despite their patronage and the consequent rich influence of Arabic and Persian, secular education was still being imparted through Sanskrit. Knowledge in its true sense is liberating, *saa vidyaa yaa vimuktaye*, and Sanskrit education was perceived as one such liberating, humanistic education. But with the introduction of English language and English education system for the purpose of administration, finding employment became the prime criteria for education and education became employment oriented- *saa vidyaa yaa niyuktaye*. From that point onwards, Sanskrit education became marginalised and its decline became rapid and irreversible. Independent India effected no change in education policy and the goal of education still remains finding the ever more elusive employment. Sanskrit graduates can find employment today only as teachers, whose numbers are declining, being unable to attract students in adequate numbers.

Sanskrit's current academic roll call

Sanskrit today is being taught between 1st and 12th standards as one of the optional languages in various states at the school level to an estimated five crore students in India. Besides, an additional 3 lakh students study Sanskrit in about 5000 traditional Sanskrit Pathashalas at the school level and in about 1000 Veda Pathashalas in the country. Eight of the 29 states of India have Sanskrit Secondary Education Board or Directorate of Sanskrit Education. About ten lakh students study Sanskrit at the college and university levels. There are 120 general Universities that offer Sanskrit at UG and PG levels, besides 15 Sanskrit Universities, having about 1000 traditional Sanskrit colleges affiliated to them. Most of these Universities, however, are not empowered to affiliate new colleges. Apart from these, there are 10 Sanskrit Academies and 16 Oriental Research Institutes. About 60 periodicals and magazines in Sanskrit are being brought out in the country every year and nearly a hundred NGOs are working for the popularization of Sanskrit. Going by these statistics, by no means can Sanskrit education be said to be dead in the country, though employment opportunities are very meagre. Of the 5 crore students who study Sanskrit in school, only about 2000 are able to use it in their career, mostly in the teaching of Sanskrit.

The gaps and silences

The quality of instruction imparted in Sanskrit has a lot to do with its unpopularity. From the British times, the primary objective of Sanskrit learning has been *to understand Sanskrit literature and to translate it into English and other Indian languages*. Accordingly, the age old European method of language teaching, namely 'Grammar Translation Method' based on rote learning, memorizing of word declensions and syntax rules was employed in the teaching of Sanskrit language -a method discarded by most of the world for language teaching, preferring instead the immersion method by which the child learns her mother-tongue effortlessly. Thus we only get books of translations in Sanskrit, not Sanskrit books; we learn about Sanskrit but not the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit is taught at the school through another language, not through itself, unlike any other language.

The MHRD document envisions that ten years hence, every Sanskrit student would be conversant and fluent in Sanskrit, that Sanskrit would be integrated with modern subjects like Science, Social Science, Economics, Mathematics, etc. and research in Sanskrit would usher in a new era of Sanskrit learning. It envisages the availability of a corpus of knowledge texts covering all branches of knowledge in Sanskrit and finally dreams that Sanskrit would find its rightful place in spheres other than education also. Such vision seems to be a tad over-ambitious.

For arriving at this goalpost, it recommends, *inter alia*, offering Sanskrit in higher secondary schools in all Groups with various combinations such as Arts, Commerce, and Science etc., teaching of Sanskrit through Sanskrit in a phased manner, offering open schooling courses in

Sanskrit medium, research (MPhil, M Ed and PhD) in Sanskrit Medium, creation of environment of Sanskrit in the university campuses, research in Sanskrit on topics relevant to current social, economic, political and scientific problems, etc. This will need initiatives and financial support for Sanskrit teaching and promotion of Sanskrit in general education as well as Sanskrit universities and in the research sector, opening of full-fledged Sanskrit cells in ICPR, ICHR and ICSSR, IITs, NITs, IISERs, IIITs, IISc, Central Universities and in AICTE approved technical colleges along with designing of structured Sanskrit courses by IGNOU and other Open Universities.

The MHRD document lays special emphasis on teacher training at all levels. It also recommends modernising the syllabi of *Veda Pathashalas*, reviving manuscript libraries and oriental research institutes and finally recommends a series of eighteen projects -the *Ashtaadashi* – for sustaining the growth of Sanskrit – like translation of knowledge texts, publishing of manuscripts, digitisation and online availability of resources, technology adaptation, reprinting of rare books and integrating Sanskrit with modern subjects etc. All these projects no doubt will require additional human resources, which will also be required for implementation of the other recommendations as enumerated above, plus every implementing agency or Institution will need additional manpower which will create employment opportunities. The point is whether those opportunities will be enough to sustain popular interest in the language? The report evades the issue. Besides, most of these opportunities will be created in the Government sector, and government sector alone cannot sustain consistent growth in employment unless the private sector is involved actively. To pretend that intensification of Sanskrit teaching and promotion of Sanskrit in education alone would be enough to create jobs in sufficient numbers is a utopia. Popularisation of Sanskrit will necessarily have to be accompanied by automatic job-creation through Sanskrit, but the report is silent about it.

Don't force it – learning from the 'sarkari' Hindi experience

It also needs to be appreciated that willingness to learn any language is an individual choice and cannot be imposed without inviting unwanted consequences, as our experiment with imposing Hindi on non-Hindi speaking people has proved time and again. If Hindi is popular today, the reason certainly is not government patronage which cannot sustain any language by itself. Bollywood probably has done far more to promote Hindi than our Parliamentary Rajbhasha Committees. Government patronage for promoting the use of so-called official Hindi in government offices has been equally disastrous, being carried to the utmost ludicrous, to the extent that a letter written entirely in English over several pages but addressed and signed only in Hindi is counted as a Hindi letter for government's purposes. Needless to say, it may have boosted government statistics about the usage of Hindi but has not contributed one bit towards the promotion of Hindi in official work. *Forcing someone to learn something just does not work.* While Sanskrit may be our indelible link to the past, we live in the present with a vision for the future. The question is whether there is a place for

Sanskrit in that future, sans Government support? At the moment, though, there seems to be none, and the MHRD document does not throw any light onto that future.

It is undeniable that abstract thought, pluralism, openness, spirit of inquiry, logic and analysis have been hallmarks of Sanskrit learning and teaching in ancient India, qualities that today are in rather short supply in modern India. Sanskrit may have the potential for a renaissance in today's India, and MHRD's perspective plan is a right step toward it if implemented with sincerity and seriousness. But in today's intricately interconnected world, integration between cultures and languages across the globe is a crucial issue. Can, or will the world integrate with Sanskrit, even if Sanskrit is integrated with the world by following the vision as enumerated above? After all, in our flat world interconnected by fibre-optic cables all over, *Saa vidyaa yaa samyojoye*, knowledge is that which integrates. Can Sanskrit be the vehicle for such integration? It remains doubtful. After all, there is no incentive for learning Sanskrit, no incentive for attracting the best students. All original texts in Sanskrit are available in English or other languages. True, Sanskrit was once the language of higher learning in science, technology, medicine, mathematics, law and economics – once it was a vibrant 'laboratory' of ideas. Today, sadly, it has become a temple, where you are expected only to worship it, but not imbibe its rational thought processes. The research in Sanskrit needs to move away from scriptures to encompass the modern ideas of liberalism, democracy and technological progress, but there is no visible sign of that as yet.