

## The Case for Sanskrit as India's National Language

By Makarand Paranjape

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*This paper discusses in depth the role and the potential of Sanskrit in India's cultural and national landscape. Reproduced with the author's permission, it has been published in Sanskrit and Other Indian Languages, ed. Shashiprabha Kumar (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2007), pp. 173-200.*

“Sanskrit is the thread on which the pearls of the necklace of Indian culture are strung; break the thread and all the pearls will be scattered, even lost forever.”

Dr. Lokesh Chandra

### Introduction

I had first heard from my friends in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, that the Mother wanted Sanskrit to be made the national language of India. Indeed, Sanskrit is taught from childhood not only in the ashram schools, but also at Auroville, the community that the Mother founded. On 11th November 1967, the Mother said: “*Sanskrit!* Everyone should learn that. Especially everyone who works here should learn that...”<sup>1</sup> Because some degree of confusion persisted over the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's views on the topic, a more direct question was put to the former on 4 October 1971:

*On certain issues where You and Sri Aurobindo have given direct answers, we [Sri Aurobindo's Action] are also specific, as for instance... on the language issue where You have said for the country that (1) the regional language should be the medium of instruction, (2) Sanskrit should be the national language, and (3) English should be the international language.*

*Are we correct in giving these replies to such questions?*  
Yes. Blessings.<sup>2</sup>

When asked by a disciple on what basis she had said that Sanskrit should be the national language of India, the Mother replied, “I said Sanskrit because Sri Aurobindo had told me so.”<sup>3</sup> Actually, Sri Aurobindo's views on Sanskrit were well thought out and forcefully formulated. For instance, in his “Preface on a National Education” (November 1920), he said:

A language, Sanskrit or another, should be acquired by whatever method is most natural, efficient and stimulating to the mind and we need not cling there to any past or present manner of teaching: but the vital question is how we are to learn and make use of Sanskrit and the indigenous languages so as to get to the heart and intimate sense of our own culture and establish a vivid continuity between the still living power of our past and the yet uncreated power of our future, and how we are to learn and use English or any other foreign tongue so as to know helpfully the life, ideas and culture of other countries and establish our right relations with the world around us. This is the aim and principle of a true national education, not, certainly, to ignore modern truth and knowledge, but to take our foundation on our own

being, our own mind, our own spirit....

While he does not advocate its use as a national language, it is clear that he wishes for its continuation and popularization. It is likely therefore that it is the Mother who re-articulated the case for Sanskrit as India's national language, the credit for which must go to her.

When I first heard of these views, I found them commendable but was doubtful of their practicality. To me, it seemed that to make Sanskrit the national language would require more than just an administrative will. First of all, to get any Government to make such a policy decision would be next to impossible, with all sorts of obstacles and political pressures put up by various interest groups. There would be opposition probably from Tamil-wallas and Urdu-wallas, but most of all from the "secular" Hindu ruling elite, who would see this as some sort of ploy by the Hindutva lobby. Even if an order to this effect were promulgated, it would be so difficult to implement all over the country. That is why I had then thought of the idea of making Sanskrit India's national language as noble but impractical. However, during the Sanskrit week held last year at JNU's Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies, it suddenly occurred to me that we need not think of a "national" language in narrow or restricted terms, but in the broadest and most effective way. Also, that an idea was not less or more valid either because it was impractical or hard to implement. That is how I began to reflect on what it means to have a national language, especially in India, and how such a national language might be safeguarded and promoted.

The key to unlocking the difficult question of whether Sanskrit should be India's national language or not is in clarity over the meaning of the word "national." This is lacking even in the Aurobindonian circles which, even while they advocate making Sanskrit the national language of India, do not define clearly what they mean by "national." One reason for writing this essay is precisely to bring about such clarity. To my mind, a national language, in the Indian context, need not mean the official language. Indeed, such a distinction is implicit in the Constitution of India itself. Clearly, the aim is not to make Sanskrit the official language of India, that is, the language of the Government, of the judiciary, of business, politics, and public affairs. In monolingual countries, official and national languages may be identical, but this is not the case in India. In India we not only have several languages, but also need certain languages to play special roles. Both Hindi and English are such languages, as the Constitution clearly recognizes. By national language, in the present context, is meant a language that is the source of our identity, a language that unites us, a language that links us with our past, a language that is the repository of our sacred texts, a language in which so much knowledge and learning from the past is stored. In one word, "national," here means a heritage language. Once the confusion over the word "national" is removed, the argument in favour of Sanskrit can be articulated more forcefully.

In this Section, I wish to examine some instances of how Sanskrit has been treated in post-Independence India.

Perhaps, the best starting point would be the Constituent Assembly which promulgated our Constitution. When I began to do some research on this subject, I realized that the Mother's pronouncements weren't the first in this regard, though what makes them weighty and special is that she made them at a time when the case for Sanskrit was quite weak. The idea of making Sanskrit not only India's national language, but also India's official language can be traced back to none other than India's first law minister and the Dalit leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Following the Independence of India in August 1947, the Constituent Assembly of India had debated the language question extensively. After months of debate, Hindi, with the Devanagari script, was clearly emerging as the favourite. There was a draft provision to this effect, with the proviso to continue using English for official purposes for a period of an additional fifteen years. It was in this context that in September 1949, the then law minister, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, moved an amendment to substitute Hindi with Sanskrit so as to make Sanskrit the official language of India. Not only were there prominent politicians and public figures from Tamil Nadu among the signatories, but also a Mr. Naziruddin Ahmed, from West Bengal, a member of the Muslim League. The latter said, "I offer you a language which is the grandest and the greatest, and it is impartially difficult, equally difficult for all to learn."<sup>4</sup> In the end, though Hindi emerged as the "winner" of the official languages sweepstakes, it was not only in the Devanagari script, but also a Hindi which the Constitution itself declared would use Sanskrit as the main source of enrichment and increasing vocabulary.<sup>5</sup>

It would be salutary to examine the views of the first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, on the subject of Sanskrit. Around the time that India's language policy was being debated in the Constituent Assembly, Nehru was reported on the 13th of February 1949 in *The Hindu* as declaring:

If I was asked what the greatest treasure which India possesses is and what is her finest heritage, I would answer unhesitatingly—it is the Sanskrit language and literature, and all that it contains. This is a magnificent inheritance, and so long as this endures and influences the life of our people, so long the basic genius of India will continue.<sup>6</sup>

This is one of the strongest endorsements of Sanskrit by anyone. Nehru's words are quoted often, especially in environs when Sanskrit needs to be defended by well-meaning, if misguided, secularists. Nehru's support for Sanskrit would have been important in those controversy-fraught times.

Nehru added later, in the Azad Memorial Address:

India built up a magnificent language, Sanskrit, and through this language, and its art and architecture, it sent its vibrant message to far away countries. It produced the *Upanishads*, the *Gita* and the Buddha. Hardly any language in the world has probably played as vital a part in the history of a race as Sanskrit has. It was not only the vehicle of the highest thought and some of the finest literature, but it became the uniting bond for India, even though there were political divisions. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were woven into the texture of millions of lives in every generation for a

thousand years. I have often wondered if our race forgot the Buddha, the *Upanishads* and the great epics, what then would it be like?<sup>7</sup>

Moving from the Constituent Assembly to the actual Constitution itself, we notice that at present it does not designate any language to be India's national language. Article 343 of the constitution considers Hindi in the Devanagari script as the *official* language of India. It also allows for the continued use of English for official purposes. Article 345 also allows for any of the 'national languages' of the union to be adopted by the state legislature as the official language of that state. Until 1967, before the 21st amendment to the constitution, fourteen regional languages were recognized. Subsequently the number has grown to twenty two. The Sahitya Academy gives away annual awards in two additional languages. This means that currently twenty four languages in India enjoy official recognition. This account suggests that as far as the constitution is concerned all of India's languages, especially the twenty two recognized by the constitution thus far, are national languages. At its weakest then, the case for Sanskrit as the national language in India does not require any further elucidation if Sanskrit is considered only one amongst the many national languages in India.

After the Constitution, the next and perhaps most important document to examine would be the Report of the Sanskrit Commission set up by the Government of India in 1956 under the Chairmanship of Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. An examination of the Report of this Commission shows that the status of Sanskrit in contemporary India has a lot to do with both the politics and policies of the State. It was this Commission's report, along with *Report of the Official Language Commission* of the Government of India that led to Sanskrit being one of the languages taught in Indian schools all over the country. According to the three-language formula, which still works at least up to the 10th Standard in Indian secondary schools, each student has to learn three languages, the mother tongue, Hindi or another Indian language, and English. To this day, in many school, Sanskrit is the third language, taken in addition to English and Hindi. The Report of the Commission is probably the most extensive and impressive argument in favour of Sanskrit education in independent India. The Commission actually recommended that Sanskrit be made "an additional official language" of India:

While for all administrative and ordinary day-to-day purposes, some pan-Indian form of Hindi may be used, it appears inevitable that, in course of time, the prospective All-India Language — *Bharati Bhasa* — at least in its written norm, which would be acceptable to all regions of India, especially in the higher reaches of education and literary activity, will be a form of simple and modernised Sanskrit.<sup>8</sup>

Though this recommendation was not accepted, many of the Report's findings have shaped the manner in which the Indian state treated Sanskrit.

One of the most remarkable chapters in the Sanskrit Commission Report is "Sanskrit and the Aspirations of Independent India"<sup>9</sup> in which a defence and justification of Sanskrit is offered. The authors point to the role of Sanskrit in the national awakening of India, especially in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's song, *Vande Mataram*, which became the "Rashtra Gayatri." This song is

entirely in Sanskrit except for a few sentences in Bangla<sup>10</sup>.

Though English contributed to the growth of political consciousness in India, only an Indian language could help create political unity. This language would have been Sanskrit, but in 1921 Mahatma Gandhi accepted Hindi or Hindustani with the Devanagari script, because, according to the Commission, Hindi in this case stood for Sanskrit:<sup>11</sup> “Sanskritised Hindi seemed to be the fitting representative for all the modern languages of India, and was looked upon as the most suitable national speech for a resurgent India... Sanskritised Hindi alone can be easily understood in all non-Hindi-speaking areas. ... The support of Hindi in a way meant laying stress on the unity of India through Sanskrit, even if it were through the intermediacy of Hindi.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the choice of Hindi as India’s official language was, according to the Commission, itself an endorsement and acknowledgement of the value of Sanskrit.

The Commission also refers to the adoption of the Upanishadic dictum “*Satyamevajayate*” as the national motto of India, the Sanskritized “*Jana Gana Mana*” as the national anthem, the motto of the Lok Sabha “*Dhamachakraprvartnaya,*” of All India Radio (Akashvani), “*Bahujan hitaya bahujana sukhaya,*” of the Life Insurance Corporation, “*Yogaksemamvahamyaham.*” The practice of using Shri and Shrimati instead of Mr. and Mrs, and so on, also show how important Sanskrit is in our national life.<sup>13</sup>

Sir William Jones in 1786 called Sanskrit a language “more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either.”<sup>14</sup> The long and unbroken continuity of Sanskrit is lauded. The Commission considers Sanskrit to be “in the broad sense of the term ... the entire linguistic development of the Aryan speech in India,”<sup>15</sup> from classical Sanskrit to the medieval Prakrits. We may extend this to include the modern Indian languages too. Sanskrit is thus “the linguistic and literary expression of that great Cultural Synthesis which is identical with Bharata-Dharma, the Spirit of India, or Indianism, as it has been sometimes described.”<sup>16</sup>

Sanskrit, moreover, is of our link with the larger world we inhabit, both West and East:

Sanskrit is our great mental and spiritual link with the Indo-European and Aryan-speaking world to the West of India — with Iran, with Armenia, with Europe. Sanskrit is the elder sister of Greek and Latin, of Gothic and Old Irish, and of Old Slav. The modern North-Indian Aryan languages and the Indo-European languages outside India — Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and the rest on one hand, and English, French, Russian and the rest on the other — are cousins belonging to the same family. The very large and indispensable Sanskrit element in the cultivated Dravidian languages of South India, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam, is a cultural link of great value between these and the Indo-European languages of Europe. ... But it has been no less a potent bond of union for India with the lands of Asia — with Serindia or Central Asia of ancient and mediaeval times where the cultures of China and India had a common meeting place; with Tibet; with China and the lands within the orbit of Chinese civilisation — Korea and Japan and Vietnam; and above all, with the lands of Farther India — Burma and Siam, Pathet Lao and Cambodia, and Cochin China or Champa, and the area of Malaya and Indonesia. Ceylon is of course a historical and cultural

projection of India. In all these lands, Sanskrit found a home for itself as the vehicle of Indian thought and civilisation which flowed out into them as a peaceful cultural extension....<sup>17</sup>

If we think of all the literature available in this linguistic system, it would be a vast treasury useful not only to India, but to the whole world: from the Vedas, the Vedangas, the Epics, the Kavya literature, drama, science, philosophy, aesthetics, indeed the endless knowledge in nearly all branches of human endeavor available in Sanskrit makes it a unique repository, the world's heritage language. In fact, Sanskrit is conducive to all the four purusharthas or cardinal aims of life, Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha, with its vast repositories of knowledge and guidance in each of these realms.<sup>18</sup> Without Sanskrit, the fullest development of the human mind is almost impossible.<sup>19</sup>

Sanskrit is also the "great unifying force" in India, knitting a vast subcontinent from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, Saurashtra to Kamarupa. Pointing out how the Chinese system of writing and modern Hebrew served to unify the newly formed nations of China and Israel respectively, the Commission asked why Sanskrit could not be expected to play a similar role in India.<sup>20</sup> It was only Sanskrit that could play the role of unifying India: "This great inheritance of Sanskrit is the golden link joining up all the various provincial languages and literatures and cultures, and it should not be allowed to be neglected and to go waste."<sup>21</sup>

The Commission next turned its attention to the role that Sanskrit had played and can play in the "Formation of Character." Not just information, Sanskrit could also influence the formation of the mind, especially in shaping and expressing India's unique contribution to the rest of humanity. Sanskrit worked "as a great stabilising force in life — as a moral anchor" in the lives of Indians<sup>22</sup> through its uplifting moral teachings. Even the sound of the language is special: "Sanskrit is a language which through its sonority and mellifluousness, has the power to lift us up above ourselves — the message of Sanskrit read or chanted is that of sursum corda — "lift up your hearts" — and this forms one of its most subtle aesthetic and dynamic values."<sup>23</sup>

The Commission also emphasized the importance of Sanskrit in contributing towards "The Intellectual Renaissance of Free India." Here a most interesting case is advanced for the retention of Sanskrit for the development of modern Indian languages. Just as a study of Sanskrit is necessary to understand Tamil, Sanskrit was necessary for the proper development of modern Indian languages, the intellectual registers of which would be derived from Sanskrit. Quoting Sivajnanamunivar's commentary on the Tolkappiyam, the oldest grammar of Tamil, "the nature of Tamil will not be clear to those who have not learnt Sanskrit (vadanul unarndarkkanrit-Tamil iyalpu vilangadu: I Eluttalikaram, sutra 1),"<sup>24</sup> the Commission makes a very persuasive argument in favour of "the retention, cultivation and development of Sanskrit, for the sake of all Modern Indian Languages."<sup>25</sup> Word-building, enriching of technical vocabulary, and standardization of key terms across several modern Indian languages would be only some of the numerous benefits of Sanskrit's contribution to the growth and enrichment of modern Indian languages. This Chapter of the Commission's Report ends with a fervent plea to make Sanskrit "the symbol of the national life India" and to accord a special place to it in the educational system.<sup>26</sup> Some of the arguments of the Commission revisited those made by the Orientalists more than 150 years ago. Those opposed to the nationalizing of Sanskrit or of making Sanskrit a reason of state have



written disparagingly about the Commission's claims, labelling them as "quaint, even absurd."<sup>27</sup>

The third instance I wish to examine is the landmark Judgment of 4th October 1994 of the Supreme Court on Sanskrit. This shows how all was not well or smooth sailing for the teaching of Sanskrit as a part of the Indian school curriculum. The attack against Sanskrit went as far as an appeal against teaching it in the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) on the grounds that it was against secularism. It needed a Judgment of the Supreme Court of India to refute the absurd proposition that it was not against secularism to teach Sanskrit in our schools.<sup>28</sup> The Court quoted the earlier policy statements of the Government of India on Sanskrit in 1968 and 1986 respectively:

Considering the special importance of Sanskrit to the growth and development of Indian languages and its unique contribution to the cultural unity of the country, facilities for its teaching at the school and university stages should be offered on more liberal basis. Development of new methods of teaching the language should be encouraged, and the possibility explored of including the study of Sanskrit in those courses (such as modern Indian philosophy) at the first and second degree stages, where such knowledge is useful. (1968)

And the 1986 statement:

Research in Indology, the humanities and Social Sciences will receive adequate support. To fulfill the need for the synthesis of knowledge, interdisciplinary research will be encouraged. Efforts will be made to delve into India's ancient fund of knowledge and to relate it to contemporary reality. This effort will imply the development of facilities for the intensive study of Sanskrit.

The Court completely refuted the claims that teaching Sanskrit was against secularism because Arabic or Persian were not accorded a similar status in the educational system. The Court said that "a secular state is not hostile to religion but holds itself neutral in matters of religion" (para 16). It quoted from the Sanskrit Commission's Report to show that Sanskrit was a binding and unifying force in India. Paragraphs 19 and 20 of the judgment spelt out the views of the Court in no uncertain terms:

19. From what has been stated above, we entertain no doubt in our mind that teaching of Sanskrit alone as an elective subject can in no way be regarded as against secularism. Indeed, our constitution requires giving of fillip to Sanskrit because of what has been stated in Article 351, in which while dealing with the duty of the Union to promote the spread of Hindi, it has been provided that, it would draw, whenever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary, primarily on Sanskrit. Encouragement to Sanskrit is also necessary because of it being one of the languages included in the Eighth Schedule.

20. We, therefore, conclude by saying that in view of importance of Sanskrit for nurturing our cultural heritage, because of which even the official education policy has highlighted the need of study of Sanskrit, making of Sanskrit alone as an elective subject, while not conceding this status to

Arabic and/or Persian, would not in any way militate against the basic tenet of secularism.

This verdict was delivered by Justice Kuldeep Singh and Justice B. L. Hansaria in response to a writ petition filed by Shri Santosh Kumar and others in 1989 against the Secretary, Ministry of Human Resources Development, and Government of India.

The next notable instance of the state's addressing the issue of Sanskrit is the setting up of the National Mission for Manuscripts by the NDA Government in 2003. The decline of Sanskrit in India was a direct consequence of colonial rule. The position of Sanskrit as India's pre-eminent intellectual language was dislodged by English as a direct consequence of imperial policy. It might have been expected therefore that sufficient resources and attention would be devoted to the study and revival of Sanskrit in independent India. However, B. Bhattacharya in his book *Sanskrit Culture in a Changing World* writes that at the time of writing the book there were at least one million manuscripts in public and private libraries in India and abroad. 95% of these manuscripts are languishing unread and untranslated. Today many of these treasures belonging not only to India but also to the world have probably been lost. The Government's efforts to change this situation of neglect are only recent as in the establishment of the National Missions for Manuscripts in 2003. According to the mission statement of NMM:

The National Mission for Manuscripts was launched in February 2003 by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, to save this most valuable but less visible of our cultural inheritances.

An ambitious five-year project, the Mission seeks not merely to locate, catalogue and preserve India's manuscripts, but also to enhance access, spread awareness and encourage their use for educational purposes. Working with specially identified Manuscript Resource Centres (MRCs) and Manuscript Conservation Centres (MCCs) in states all over the country, the Mission has collected data on manuscripts located in a variety of places, from universities and libraries to temples, mathas, madrasas, monasteries and private collections.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, the mission statement does not use the word Sanskrit anywhere. But since the majority of the rarest of Indian manuscripts are in Sanskrit, it is assumed that the work will concentrate on Sanskrit. However, the fact that this is nowhere openly stated shows, once again, the ambivalence of our "secular" culture towards our identity and heritage. Interestingly, contrary to what is popularly thought, the Government recognized Sanskrit as a classical language only as recently as 27th October 2005. Tamil, in fact, had been recognized as a classical language before Sanskrit.

### **The Case for Sanskrit**

### **Chapter 3**

In this final section of the paper, I offer some arguments in favour of Sanskrit as India's national language. By no means are all these arguments new or original; some have been around for



several decades, if not centuries. However, India as a state is itself only sixty years old. So the present case is in relation to India as we know and understand it today. The destinies of languages are intimately tied up with those of states. As someone put it, a living language is one in which you can make a living. By that token, aside from Sanskrit, a number of other Indian languages too are endangered. English is India's dominant language, so much so that this argument in favour of Sanskrit is being made in English. It is erroneous to regard the support of language by a state as mere patronage. In the case of Sanskrit, it will be wise for the state and its machinery to invest in Sanskrit. This investment will be matched or supported by private enterprise too.

Together, Sanskrit and *sanskriti*, which is the culture of India, will be strengthened. We have to begin to understand why such an investment in Sanskrit will not only be profitable, but is necessary.

To understand the case for Sanskrit, I shall first rehearse arguments already prevalent. Many of these have their origins in the Constituent Assembly debates. Since the proposal to make Sanskrit the national language of India originated persisted, as has been pointed out, in Aurobindonian circles, it is to be expected that the reasons for advancing such a case should also be reiterated the same source. In an impressive book called *The Wonder That is Sanskrit* (2002) the authors Sampad and Vijay devote a chapter to "Sanskrit as the national language of India," in which some of the earlier arguments in favour of Sanskrit are repeated and stated more coherently.

I have identified at least seven arguments in favour of Sanskrit as a national language of India in this book:

1. Only a language that is native to a country, that is, a language that has taken birth and developed in a particular country, can be the national language of that country. Thus no matter how widely spread English is, since it is a foreign language, it should not be considered for the position of India's national language. "The national language of India has to be a language of and from India."<sup>30</sup>
2. The national language of a culture must be a language that is the repository of the best, highest, and noblest aspirations of that culture. This language, for India, is Sanskrit. If, on the other hand, a language that is alien to a culture is used to describe, understand or represent that culture then many distortions are bound to creep in. That is why Sanskrit rather than English is more suited to be the national language of India. "It will not be an exaggeration to say that if India has to rise, Sanskrit will have to rise once again."<sup>31</sup>
3. As is obvious, the first two arguments are against English more than in favour of Sanskrit. This is because the next argument shows how Sanskrit like English cannot be identified with any particular region of the country and is therefore "national." In other words, only a non-regional language can be a national language. "Sanskrit is alone non-regional. No province or state or people can claim it as its own."<sup>32</sup>

4. Sanskrit has been since ancient times the link language of the whole subcontinent. Therefore Sanskrit has been a binding force throughout the history of India. Again, like English, Sanskrit is India's link language, but unlike English it is both native to India and co-extensive with the entire civilizational trajectory of the subcontinent.

5. Again, in contradistinction to English, Sanskrit is the "mother" of most Indian tongues. All these including Tamil have a large percentage of words derived from Sanskrit. Sanskrit through the well known processes of Tatsam (words borrowed as they are from Sanskrit) and Tadbhava (words derived from Sanskrit but modified), it is estimated that almost 70% of the words of most modern Indian languages are from Sanskrit.<sup>33</sup> That is why it is possible for people in India from different parts of India to understand each other even if they speak different languages. After all, there is a common vocabulary not to speak of a great deal of similarities in syntax. Unlike what more recent ideologically informed arguments, influenced by proponents of Dravidianism have claimed, even Tamil shows a very close relationship with Sanskrit.<sup>34</sup>

6. Sanskrit is capable of changing with the times, especially in its capacity to produce an infinite variety of new words. Actually these words deriving from Sanskrit, also feed the other modern Indian languages. If so, then why shouldn't the source of this vitality, Sanskrit, itself not be the national language of India?

7. Sanskrit as a source of unity and pride is a major reason to make it India's national language. This reason, it would seem, subsumes all the others:

Through Sanskrit every Indian can feel an oneness and belonging with every other Indian and every part of India. We can feel proud of a great and magnificent heritage, which can compare with the best in the world in every field and to which every region of India has contributed. We can also look to the future with the confidence that this mighty nation will rise again and attain a glory far greater than ever attained in the past, and in which every Indian has a role to play.<sup>35</sup>

The next chapter of *The Wonder That is Sanskrit* also tries to refute some charges against Sanskrit, especially the charge that Sanskrit is a Hindu language and that it is a dead and difficult language.<sup>36</sup> Though it does not do so, there is also a need to refute the idea that Sanskrit is the language only of Brahmins. Whatever it may have been in the past, certainly in today's India, this is no longer the case. Access to Sanskrit is open to all.

In a more intensely polemical and well-documented defence of Sanskrit, Rajiv Malhotra, following a similar strategy of defence combined with offence, offers the following framework in his case in favour of Sanskrit. His essay entitled "Geopolitics and Sanskrit Phobia" was first delivered as a lecture at Silpakorn University in Thailand in 2005, and is now posted on the net in his blog Sulekha.com network. Malhotra sees Sanskrit as the site for a civilizational clash, with those attempting to suppress the language being enemies of India. He argues that:

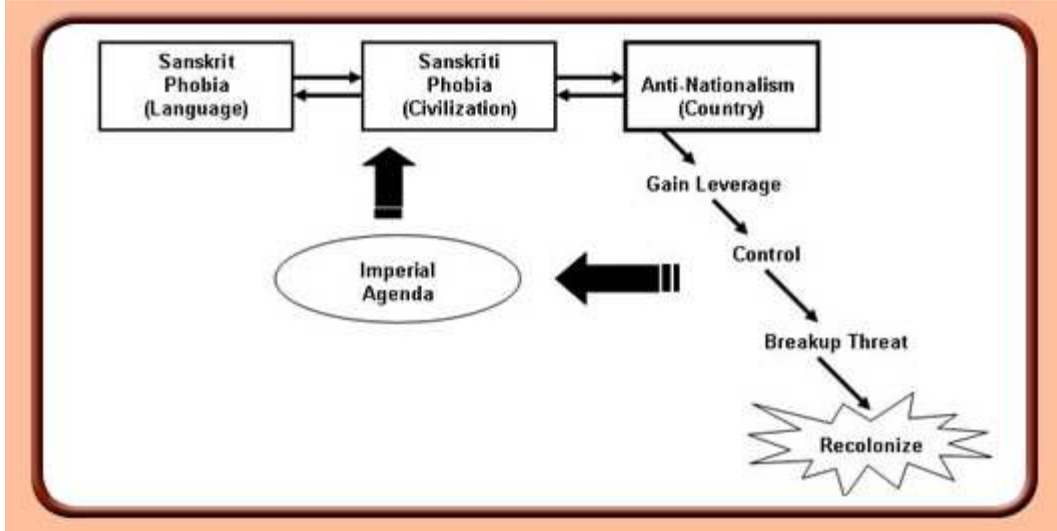
1. Sanskrit is more than a language. Like all languages, its structures and categories contain a built-in framework for representing specific worldviews. Sanskriti is the name of the culture and civilization that embodies this framework. One may say that Sanskriti is the term for what has recently become known as Indic Civilization, a civilization that goes well beyond the borders of modern India to encompass South Asia and much of Southeast Asia. At one time, it included much of Asia.
2. Interactions among different regions of Asia helped to develop and exchange this pan-Asian Sanskriti. Numerous examples involving India, Southeast Asia and China are given.
3. Sanskrit started to decline after the West Asian invasions of the Indian subcontinent. This had a devastating impact on Sanskriti, as many world-famous centres of learning were destroyed, and no single major university was built for many centuries by the conquerors.
4. Besides Asia, Sanskrit and Sanskriti influenced Europe's modernity, and Sanskrit Studies became a large-scale formal activity in most European universities. These influences shaped many intellectual disciplines that are (falsely) classified as "Western." But the "discovery" of Sanskrit by Europe also had the negative influence of fuelling European racism since the 19th century.
5. Meanwhile, in colonial India, the education system was de-Sanskritized and replaced by an English based education. This served to train clerks and low level employees to administer the Empire, and to start the process of self-denigration among Indians, a trend that continues today. Many prominent Indians achieved fame and success as middlemen serving the Empire, and Gandhi's famous 1908 monograph, "*Hind Swaraj*," discusses this phenomenon.
6. After India's independence, there was a broad based Nehruvian love affair with Sanskrit as an important nation-building vehicle. However, successive generations of Indian intellectuals have replaced this with what this paper terms "Sanskrit Phobia," i.e. a body of beliefs now widely disseminated according to which Sanskrit and Sanskriti are blamed for all sorts of social, economic and political problems facing India's underprivileged classes. This section illustrates such phobia among prominent Western Indologists and among trendy Indians involved in South Asian Studies who learn about Sanskrit and Sanskriti according to Western frameworks and biases.
7. The clash of civilizations among the West, China and Islam is used as a lens to discuss the future of Sanskriti across South and Southeast Asia.
8. Some concrete suggestions are made for further consideration to revitalize Sanskrit as a living language that has potential for future knowledge development and empowerment of humanity.

Malhotra, more than any of his predecessors, spends a considerable degree of energy in refuting the oppositions to Sanskrit. He quotes heavily from Kapil Kapoor's earlier essay "Eleven Objections to Sanskrit Literary Theory: A Rejoinder," which employed a similar strategy and is

worth reading in its own right as a spirited defence on Sanskrit poetics and literary theory:

<b>Sanskrit-Phobic Arguments</b>	<b>Responses</b>
There has been no connection between Sanskrit and Prakrit (and/or other South Asian vernacular languages).	Linguistic evidence suggests that Sanskrit is related to Prakrit languages and that exchanges occurred in both directions.
Sanskrit has been the instrument of creating a civilization built on Brahmanical hegemony and domination of the subaltern.	This is missionary/colonial lens imposing Western social models to a very different Indian social structure and denies the vital role of Sanskrit in shaping and fulfilling, thriving and vibrant culture that benefited many.
Sanskrit is only a language of rites and rituals that are devoid of philosophical merit.	The depth and breadth of Sanskrit literature covers many non-religious disciplines. Besides, the rites and rituals are often deeply poetic and reflect a plurality of philosophies of life.
Sanskrit does not have the expressive spirit and temper of science and technology.	The depth and breadth of Sanskrit thought encompasses many scientific and technical fields such as mathematics and metallurgy. Abstract thought, open inquiry and logic are key hallmarks of Sanskrit learning.
Sanskrit has no value to non-Hindu traditions. It would compromise secularism.	Numerous Jain and Buddhist scriptures are composed in Sanskrit. Sikh scholars went to Benares to learn Sanskrit.
As a dead language, Sanskrit has no use to world culture.	Sanskrit, just as it contributed to Western thought, has the potential to contribute towards a renaissance of thought in Southeast Asia and India.

Malhotra also offers the following diagrammatic representation of the broader Western and self-hating Indophobic's strategy to suppress Sanskrit and Sanskriti:



Whether or not we agree with all his assumptions, methods, or conclusions, Malhotra's essay has done great service to the cause of Sanskrit in fearlessly exposing the conspiracy against both the language and the culture that it embodies.

In addition to these arguments already expounded and known I would add the following:

1. A nation, people, and a language are deeply interlinked. Investment in any aspect of culture especially language is bound to pay off in terms of the benefits of “soft power.” In other words what make countries great in a competitive global world is not just military might but cultural depth and resources. To destroy or deny the source of one’s cultural potency would be tantamount to a self-emasculation. Only a culture with a deeply internalised sense of contempt and shame for itself will commit such cultural hara-kiri. India with its history of colonization is close to this perilous state of self-loathing but better wisdom should prevail. Cultural self-enhancement and self empowerment are essential for Svaraj. Sanskrit, not exclusively, but in addition to other Indian languages can contribute greatly to such self-enhancement.

2. Sanskrit is one of the markers of India’s distinctiveness. Though at one time this language spread far and wide in India’s region of influence, being widely used in Malaysia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, Sanskrit is one of India’s unique contributions and gifts to human civilization, especially after it has shrunk back to its source country, India. That is why it is the one of the features that makes us ourselves. Sanskrit, which is the source of our identity, also needs to be nurtured for what it gave us and will continue to give us. Like an aged parent whom we need to care for, we must look after Sanskrit.

3. In other words, Sanskrit is now India’s responsibility. After the partition of India “the burden” of Sanskrit rests securely, almost exclusively on India’s shoulders. It may continue to be a language of Orientalist study and antiquarian curiosity especially in the more prosperous countries of the world, but the responsibility for Sanskrit must be owned up by India.

4. Sanskrit is not so much a *Deva Bhasha* (a language of the Gods) but a language that shows us the way to the Gods — or to what is Godly or Divine. The Gods here do not necessarily imply supernatural beings but signify an order of things, a moral, an ethical norm, a way of living that we have called Dharma in this part of the world. Sanskrit helps us not so much to know our world but to know our selves. To that extent it is the language which contributed to our emancipation and enhancement. We must not forsake Sanskrit because it helps us to remain Dharmic 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.

5. 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 culture refinement and definition is indispensable to India. Sanskrit is not merely a language but a larger system of ideas, thought and cultural practices. In that sense this larger system includes not just Sanskrit but Pali, the Prakrits, even the modern Indian languages, a part of which must include English nowadays. In other words even Indian English, not to speak of other Indian languages, is incomplete without Sanskrit as is Sanskrit is incomplete without Pali, the Prakrits, the modern Indian



languages, and Indian English. The cultural landscape of India is diversity in unity not a unity in diversity. Interestingly it was Sri Aurobindo who advocated the former and Jawaharlal Nehru the latter. Unity in India cannot come from diversity. Rather diversity is derived from unity. Therefore Sanskrit is not to be seen in opposition but in a continuum with other Indian languages. It is this continuum with Sanskrit as the indispensable bedrock that constitutes the national heritage of India.

## **Conclusion**

## **ch4**

In this paper I have tried to argue that the idea of Sanskrit as India's national language begins to make sense when we distinguish between national language and official language. "Official language" may be used for day to day tasks as well as the activities of the government. Clearly Sanskrit cannot be expected to perform that role at least not in the present circumstances. But if

by “national language” is meant a language which is important to national identity, a language that unifies, a language that is a source of pride, a language that defines and contributes to a peoples identity, a language moreover that is neither sectarian nor exclusive to any particular group, then Sanskrit fits the bill. When we consider national to mean the source of one’s heritage, then Sanskrit surely qualifies as India’s major if not foremost national language. All Indian languages are our national languages, but this does not mean that Sanskrit should be excluded from this list. On the contrary, though all Indian languages are national languages Sanskrit is national in a very special sense of the word and it is this that I have tried to establish in this paper.

From this standpoint, calling Sanskrit the national language does not go against the interests of any other language. Even if all the other languages may be considered national languages, Sanskrit retains its own a special place. It is the case for making Sanskrit a national language in this special sense that this essay has tried to elaborate.

Sanskrit is a language that all Indians need to learn in order to have a better understanding of their identity. It is the language that it is necessary for an appreciation of who we are. While other languages, including one’s mother tongue, are also identity languages, Sanskrit is singular in that it provides the sources of the deeper self of India such as no other language does effectively.

While nearly all the major languages of India have a state to protect and promote them, Sanskrit has no one state. Therefore, it is the turn of all these languages and all the states of India wherein they flourish to learn and support Sanskrit, the real “mother tongue” of Indians. We may provide exceptions to some states, which have had no historical contact with Sanskrit, but even these may wish to study it in order to understand India. The same reason for learning Sanskrit may be given to those for whom it is neither a sacred language nor a primary language of culture.

This essay has been a plea to renew the call to make Sanskrit our national language, once again to invite the people of this country to embrace Sanskrit and give it her rightful place in large family of India’s languages.

I cannot resist the temptation of ending with a memorable quotation from our current President of India, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. This is not the place to speak of the religion of the President, but it needs to be noted that he is neither Brahmin by caste or Hindu by birth. His example shows how we might leave sectarian considerations aside in order to consider the case of Sanskrit from an objective standpoint. Interacting with the students of the Sree Gururavabhoma Sanskrit Vidyapeetam, Mantralayam, on 1st February 2007, he said:

Though I am not an expert in Sanskrit, I have many friends who are proficient in Sanskrit. Sanskrit is a beautiful language. It has enriched our society from time immemorial. Today many nations are trying to research Sanskrit writings which are there in our ancient scriptures. I understand that there is a wealth of knowledge available in Sanskrit which scientists and technologists are finding today.<sup>37</sup>

The full text of his speech, which is quoted on the President’s official website, is a source of

inspiration to all of us, particularly the devotees of Sanskrit and Sanskriti.

*Prof. Makarand Paranjape is a professor of English, Jawaharlal Nehru University, a prolific author, a well-known cultural exponent, and the editor of Evam: Forum on Indian Representations.*

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2 Ibid. ([Back to text](#))

3 Ibid. ([Back to text](#))

4 *Constituent Assembly Debates* 1334, quoted in Ramaswamy, 354-355. ([Back to text](#))

5 Ibid., 357-358. ([Back to text](#))

6 Jawaharlal Nehru, quoted in *Sanskrit Commission Report* "The Importance of Sanskrit in Indian History and Culture," 72. ([Back to text](#))

7 Jawaharlal Nehru, Azad Memorial Address, cited in *The Wonder that Was Sanskrit* 160. ([Back to text](#))

8 Ibid., 202. ([Back to text](#))

9 Ibid., 70-92. ([Back to text](#))

- 10 Ibid., 70. ([Back to text](#))
- 11 Ibid., 71. ([Back to text](#))
- 12 Ibid. ([Back to text](#))
- 13 Ibid., 72. ([Back to text](#))
- 14 Ibid., 73. ([Back to text](#))
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- 17 Ibid., 75-76. ([Back to text](#))
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- 20 Ibid., 83. ([Back to text](#))
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- 22 Ibid., 85. ([Back to text](#))
- 23 Ibid. ([Back to text](#))
- 24 Ibid., 86. ([Back to text](#))
- 25 Ibid. ([Back to text](#))
- 26 Ibid., 93. ([Back to text](#))
- 27 Ramaswamy, 379. ([Back to text](#))
- 28 For a complete text of the Judgment, see <http://sanskrita-bharati.org/newsite/news/SAMSKRIT.doc> or [www.ifih.org/resourcessupremecourtonsanskrit.htm](http://www.ifih.org/resourcessupremecourtonsanskrit.htm) ([Back to text](#))
- 29 <http://namami.nic.in/mission.htm> accessed on 29 January 2007. ([Back to text](#))
- 30 *The Wonder That is Sanskrit*, 134. ([Back to text](#))
- 31 Ibid. ([Back to text](#))
- 32 Ibid. ([Back to text](#))
- 33 Ibid., 136. ([Back to text](#))
- 34 Ibid., 138-139. ([Back to text](#))
- 35 Ibid., 142. ([Back to text](#))
- 36 Ibid., 145-150. ([Back to text](#))
- 37 The complete text of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's speech is available from: <http://pib.nic.in/archieve/others/2007/feb07/2007020201.pdf>. ([Back to text](#))