



# The Vedic Institute of Connecticut

*Study, Learn and Share the wisdom of the Vedas with the world at large*

तेजस्विनावधीतमस्तु (May we be illumined together)

## Sanskrit Resurgence?

by

Dr. A.V. (Sheenu) Srinivasan\*

... “whatever its antiquity” ... Sanskrit is “a language of most 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 strong affinity” ---- Philologist Sir William Jones (1746-1794)

Resurgence? After three and a half centuries? It appears so! Let me share with you the encouraging signs that lead me to believe that the tide appears to be turning in favor of the devabhasha – both in India and Britain. We here in the U.S. need to catch up!

Within the span of a single week this August, several simultaneous developments, in the context of Sanskrit language, propelled me from feeling discouraged to an impressive height full of joy and promise. Let me elaborate. Some readers of this journal may be aware that I have been performing Hindu wedding ceremonies for about four decades, and through it all a single factor served as inspiration and encouragement: the Hindu youth who would seek me out to perform their weddings. Their sincerity, enthusiasm and interest to learn and incorporate their heritage into that special day in their lives were genuine and touching. They all realized and accepted the fact that all rituals are in Sanskrit and that the format we have developed integrates joy with discipline. Our plan provides the guests with an overview in English delivered near the beginning of the ceremonies and, with a program note in hand, both Hindus and non-Hindus are able to appreciate the beauty and elegance of the sounds and sights of the ceremony. Without exception this has gone on smoothly all these years.

Development #1: Most recently however (2014), some of the couples planning their weddings began to pay more attention to and appreciate my translations, and to wonder why the ceremony couldn't be conducted entirely in English even though they suspected what my answer might be! I did however appreciate their reasoning. In one case the reasoning was that no one in the audience understood Sanskrit anyway and so why not have more English than Sanskrit? In the other case, the question arose naturally because I succeeded in matching in English the content, meaning and spirit of several steps defined by my counterpart – a Christian minister. For example when he would describe that the bride is a crown on the groom's head, I translated *मूर्धनं पत्युरारोह* *mūrdhānam patyurāroha* (May your husband keep you on your head), while blessing the bride! (Ref: my paper Hindu Philosophy of Marriage posted at [www.avsrinivasan.com](http://www.avsrinivasan.com)). When the couple saw the nearly identical sentiments in many of the steps from the two traditions, they wondered why not simply stick to English all the way!! Of course that did not happen! But I sensed from these dialogs, coming one after another in a short period of time, an indication of a possibly new trend and to me it was somewhat alarming and discouraging.

Development #2: Recently (August 2014), in initiating the activities of the Vedic Institute of Connecticut that I direct, we began to define our mission and I offered this: **Study, Learn and Share the Wisdom of the Vedas with the World-at-large**. And it appeared to us that the first logical step in this mission is to help train young people of Hindu origin who are interested in learning Sanskrit through a strong web-presence. So we have begun to develop lessons with a unique approach – Chant and Learn. Each lesson will have its counterpart for non-Hindus interested in learning Sanskrit.

Development #3: On August 12, a friend of mine sent me an email regarding Sanskrit taught in Britain that propelled me to a joyous height. Suddenly the situation in regard to the possible acceptance of Sanskrit in our studies/rituals looked promising. I learned, to my utter surprise, that at a British school (St. James, in London) Sanskrit is taught as a compulsory language and an attached video showed a British girl chanting a shloka from the Upanishads. The teacher and a student then explain how much the students are benefiting from this study! It is a unique experience and a sight to see and hear. I offer it below for your information and enjoyment:

Sanskrit thriving in British schools - YouTube" (2min 41 seconds) at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsY3NVrviw>  
[http://www.indiatribune.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=973:a-british-school-makes-sanskrit-compulsory&catid=99:column&Itemid=462](http://www.indiatribune.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=973:a-british-school-makes-sanskrit-compulsory&catid=99:column&Itemid=462)

#### A British school makes Sanskrit compulsory

This news undoubtedly helped strengthen our resolve to continue our efforts in regard to teaching Sanskrit. And we are now planning to approach school districts to consider adopting the St. James School initiative and offer Sanskrit as a language of study.

Development #4: Digging a little deeper, in the same week, we learned from a nineteenth century publication (Elihu Burritt: A Sanskrit Handbook, Longmans, Green and Co. London, 1875, p3) the following: a century even earlier, the philologist Sir William Jones (1746-1794) in his comments on the Sanskrit language “declared that, whatever its antiquity, it was a ‘language of most 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 strong affinity.’” Burritt continues to say: “Certainly no higher tribute to the structure, richness, and power of a language could be offered to it than these expressive words convey”.

Fast forward two centuries and, as we said above, the St James Independent Schools of London have been teaching Sanskrit to their pupils since 1975. Elena Jessup, who is currently (June 2008) doing her MA in Sanskrit at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London) and is a teacher at the school, talks to Venetia Ansell. (See Sanskrit @ St James, Earsby Street, London W14 8AS, UK). You may read the interview below:

St James is an unlikely location for Sanskrit lessons. The schools – two junior and two senior ones – based in central London, have no Hindu, or indeed any other religious, affiliation. The pupils are by no means predominantly, let alone solely, of Asian descent; plenty of white middle class English girls and boys, as well as children from Kazakhstan, Africa and Iran, are educated here. So why Sanskrit?

“The founder of the school, Leon MacLaren, thought it would be interesting

to introduce Sanskrit into a Western context, mainly because of its proximity to the source of Indo-European languages,” explains Elena. The school does have a spiritual orientation too, following the school of Advaita philosophical thought, which goes well with Sanskrit – the language of the Upanishads and other Indian philosophical treatises.

But MacLaren’s lofty principles are perhaps of less importance to parents than the fact that their children seem both to enjoy and to benefit from the exposure to a language famous for its grammatical perfection and wealth of literature. Paul Moss, the headmaster, cites improved motor skills through writing in Devanagari, better control over pronunciation thanks to the range of sounds Sanskrit has, and a general increased sharpness as evidence on the advantages of learning Sanskrit.”

This was an eye opener and very touching to those of us who love Sanskrit. I hate to confess that I had no clue that such a bold step of offering Sanskrit as a compulsory subject at a school in London was not common knowledge among those of us who ought to have known.

Development #5: And then on 8/24/14, as I was giving finishing touches to a lesson, another revealing story appears in the NY Times Book Review about a book by Vikram Chandra (*GEEK SUBLIME: The beauty of Code, Code of Beauty*, reviewed by James Gleick) which further reinforces the power of Sanskrit. Part of that review is quoted below:

“Sometime around 500 B.C., the ancient scholar Panini analyzed the Sanskrit language at a level of complexity that has never been matched since, for any language. His grammar, the *Ashtadhyayi*, comprises some 4,000 rules meant to generate all the possible sentences of Sanskrit from roots of sound and meaning — phonemes and morphemes. The rules include definitions; headings; operational rules, including “replacement, affixation, augmentation and compounding”; and “metarules,” which call other rules recursively. Sound familiar? Panini’s grammar of Sanskrit bears more than a family resemblance to a modern programming language. As Chandra says, the grammar is itself “an algorithm, a machine that consumes phonemes and morphemes and produces words and sentences.” This is not a coincidence. American syntactic theory, Chomsky channeling Panini, formed the soil in which the computer languages grew.”

Development # 6: A member of the Vedic Institute who is actively involved in developing the lessons emailed me a couple of youtube files which show Indian youth learning conversational Sanskrit. Another enjoyable set of sights and sounds. Worth watching indeed:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnIBwHJPWuA>

And what can be a better testimony than the above developments spanning two centuries (and a single week!) to inject the hope and promise of a possible Sanskrit resurgence. The Vedic Institute is proud to play a modest role in making Sanskrit, which most Hindus acknowledge as the देवभाषा (devabhāṣā, language of the Gods), come alive through teaching the language via the medium of chants.

We plan to help you learn Sanskrit. The Vedic Institute's approach to teaching Sanskrit is different. We do not follow the usual method of introducing you to nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs etc. to start with. Instead we have chosen to begin with Sanskrit words and phrases – especially and frequently used in pujas, ceremonies and rituals. For non-Hindus interested in learning Sanskrit, the same approach will be used but with a slight bent i.e. instead of using Hindu rituals as the basis we use such phrases and chants from Sanskrit literature that transcend any faith.

We call it **Chant & Learn**.

\*\*\*\*\*

\* Director of Vedic Institute of Connecticut, Author of *Hinduism for Dummies* and *Vedic Wedding: Origins, Tradition and Practice*. More information from [www.avsrinivasan.com](http://www.avsrinivasan.com)