



# THE DISCOVERY OF THE SANSKRIT

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# The Discovery of Sanskrit.



- ❧ Its is the language of ancient India.
- ❧ It is older than Greek or Latin or German.
- ❧ The Sanskrit verbal adjective *sáṃskṛta*- may be translated as "put together, constructed, well or completely formed.
- ❧ Its closest ancient relatives are the Iranian languages Old Persian and Avestan (associated with northeastern Iran and Old Persian).
- ❧ The earliest attested Sanskrit texts are Brahmanical texts of the Rigveda, which date to the mid-to-late second millennium BCE.

# The Nature of the Sanskrit Language

- There was a language family of ancient India; usually this family is called **Indic** by modern linguists.
- There were a number of dialects.
- This language was preserved in epics and ritual incantations that were carefully memorized and passed down through the generations.
- Because of the religious nature of these pieces there was a religious devotion to preserving them exactly.

- About the fifth or sixth century BCE a grammarian named Panini carried out a program of regularizing Indic.
- In effect, he created a dialect of Indic in which the irregularities were eliminated.
- He formulated nearly four thousand rules concerning grammar and morphology (the formation of words) for this dialect.
- Thus this dialect of Indic was called the perfected or refined language.
- That is the meaning of **Sanskrit, the perfected language**.
- It became the preferred language for religious and philosophical discourse.
- The Indic language preceding Sanskrit is usually called **Vedic**.
- Sometimes the Indic language is called Sanskrit and Sanskrit per se is called **Classical Sanskrit and Vedic Indic** is then called Vedic Sanskrit.
- That terminology is inappropriate because Sanskrit per se did not exist until **Panini** created it.

## The Discovery of the Relationship of Sanskrit and the Languages of Europe

- The discovery is usually attributed to **William Jones**.
- William Jones traveled to Calcutta to be a judge.
- His intention was to systematize the native law of India so that Britain could rule India by native law which was logically consistent.
- In order to carry this goal, which he perceived as his life's work, he needed to study history and this meant being able to read Indian history.
- He was not particularly interested in languages as such at the time.

- He had had a classical education in Britain so he had knowledge of Latin and Greek.
- There was an acquaintance of Jones named **Charles Wilkins** who was a British officer intensely interested in Asian studies.
- Jones relied upon Wilkins' knowledge of **Sanskrit for translations of historical writings relating to Indian law.**
- In addition to needing information from writings in Sanskrit Jones needed a knowledge of Persian for material from the days of the Mogul Empire.
- Jones dependence upon Wilkins for translation worked well, but Wilkins could be sent back to Britain at time.
- Therefore Jones decided that he must learn Sanskrit himself.

- There was another factor motivating Jones. He was a devout Christian and believed the Biblical stories to be literally true.
- He therefore believed that the people of India had to be descendants of Noah's family.
- Therefore the history of the Indians must back at some point in time coincide with Biblical history.
- Jones therefore wanted to understand the legends and religion of Hinduism in order to somehow make it fit in with the history of the Hebrews, Greeks and Romans. For this too he needed to know the historical language of India.

- In 1785 William Jones, judge, began seriously studying Sanskrit and embarked upon a new facet of his life, as a linguistic scholar.
- He found Sanskrit to be a marvelous language. And to his surprise he found that he could guess the meaning of some Sanskrit words from his knowledge of Latin and Greek.
- After four months of study he wrote and delivered a paper in which he said:



- The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a 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 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 philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.

- Jones became a Sanskrit enthusiast and communicated that enthusiasm to the intellectual world of Europe of the time through his writings.
- The examples of cognate words cited are instances such as **raj for king in Sanskrit and rex in Latin.**
- These are alright but the most powerful evidence comes from such common words as the names for numbers.

Number	Sanskrit	Latin	Greek
1	éka	unus	mono-
2	dvá	duo	di-
3	trí	tres	tri-
4	catúr	quattuor	tetra-
5	páñca	quinque	
6	sás	sex	hexa-
7	saptá	septem	hepta-
8	astá	octo	octa-
9	náva	novem	ennea-

- William Jones was not actually the first to observe the relationship between Sanskrit and Greek and Latin.
- In 1583 an English Jesuit noted it in writing and two years later, in 1585, an Italian merchant in the Portuguese enclave of Goa also noted it in writing.
- Twenty years before Jones, in 1768, a French Jesuit in Pondicherry noted the resemblance of Sanskrit to Latin and Greek and concluded that the three must have a common origin.

- At first Jones' revelation simply added Sanskrit to the set of Scythian languages.
- But scholars felt the Scythian name was inappropriate and coined the term Indo-Germanic on the basis of the two languages considered to be at the extremes geographically of the language family.
- This term was later replaced with Indo-European on the basis that Indo-Germanic gave too much emphasis to German and not enough to the other languages of Europe. Of course the same could be said with respect to Indo-European and the Iranian languages.



# **Twelve Vowels and Two Diphthongs**

## **Thirty Six Consonants: In five major sets and five minor sets:**

### **Major sets:**

- **Gutturals: k, kh, g, gh, n'**
- **Palatals: c, ch, j, jh, ñ**
- **Cerebrals: t, th, d, dh, n.**
- **Dentals: t, th, d, dh, n**
- **Labials: p, ph, b, bh, m**

### **Minor sets**

- **Semivowels (liquids): r, l, (glices) r, v**
- **Sibilants: s', s, s**
- **Aspirates: voiced and unvoiced h**
- **Nasal with closed lips: m'**