

The Wonder That Is Sanskrit

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SNAPSHOT

Most Indian languages, in greater or lesser degree, trace their roots in Sanskrit. In that sense, more than a mother tongue, Sanskrit is a grandmother tongue.

The Censuses do not indicate how many people in India actually speak Sanskrit.

It is clear that Sanskrit was not restricted to kshatriyas and brahmanas.

If we do not learn Sanskrit, a vast and profound body of knowledge will be lost to us forever

An event for International Mother Tongue Day was organised by UNESCO in Paris on 3 March. The Government of India (HRD Ministry, in conjunction with India's Mission at UNESCO) took active interest and decided to project Sanskrit. The following essay is based on the talks given in that event by Dr. Bibek Debroy who was nominated as a representative by the Government-

I stand before you as a representative of an old civilization, to speak about an old language. This is a celebration of International Mother Language Day. Acknowledging Bangladesh's role in getting the UN system to give 21 February that recognition, let me refer to it as আন্তর্জাতিক মাতৃভাষা দিবস. I wish to speak to you about संस्कृत (Sanskrit). I cannot say that Sanskrit is my mother language, my mother tongue, my মাতৃভাষা. It is much more than that.

Indians are multi-lingual. Because of the fuzzy border between language and dialect, I

can't even tell you how many languages are spoken in India. Around 125 are major languages, but another 1500 minor languages are spoken. In a way, each of these is a mother language. 22 languages are listed in a Schedule to the Constitution. This gives them an official kind of status. Sanskrit is one of these and Sanskrit also has official language status in a State like Uttarakhand.

Once every ten years, we have a Census. The last Census was in 2011, but we still don't have the details from that Census on India's great linguistic diversity. For the preceding Censuses, the number of people who reported Sanskrit as a mother tongue was 2,212 in 1971, 6,106 in 1981, 49,736 in 1991 and 14,135 in 2001. That is no indicator of how many people in India actually speak Sanskrit.

As I have said, India is multi-lingual. Indians speak more than one language. For Sanskrit to be the first language or mother tongue is rare. But it can be the third or fourth language. We don't capture that. Hence, we don't know how many Indians speak Sanskrit. We capture this imperfectly and inadequately. That's also probably the reason why those Census numbers show that kind of fluctuation from one Census to another.

In case, someone has told you Sanskrit is a dead language, please disabuse that person. As I have said, there are 14,135 people who still declare it their mother tongue. A slightly dated 2005 study listed more than 3000 books written in Sanskrit, published after India's Independence in 1947. We have something called the Sahitya Akademi. It is like a National Academy for Letters. Every year, it gives awards to literary works. Since 1956, there has been an award for Sanskrit.

In the initial years of these Sahitya Akademi awards, works on Sanskrit, not necessarily in Sanskrit, were also given awards. However, since 1967, those awards have been restricted to works written in Sanskrit. True, there hasn't been an award every year. But since 1967, forty-two authors have been given such awards on works straddling research, poetry, epic poetry, biography, novels and short stories. In a separate Sahitya Akademi category of literature written for children, compositions in Sanskrit have been conferred awards.



Sahitya Akademi Award

There are many Sanskrit academies which give awards to works in Sanskrit. There are 15 Sanskrit universities. Several schools teach Sanskrit. There are thousands of Sanskrit colleges and traditional “toll”s which are affiliated to the Sanskrit Universities. Since 1970, the Rashtrya Sanskrit Sansthan, a deemed university, has existed to propagate and develop Sanskrit. Films have been made in Sanskrit; not thousands of years ago, films didn’t exist then. Adi Shankaracharya, conventionally dated to 788-820 CE, was a great philosopher and religious teacher. In 1983, a film in Sanskrit was produced on his life.



Adi Shankaracharya

Most of you have heard of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna's teachings to Arjuna on the eve of the battle of Kurukshetra and part of the great epic, Mahabharata. A film in Sanskrit, titled “*Bhagavad Gita*” was produced in 1983. A Sanskrit poet and playwright, Vishakhadatta wrote a play titled “*Mudrarakshasa*”. This was about the great emperor Chandragupta Maurya, dated to the 4th and 3rd century BCE. We don't know precisely when the play was written, the range is between the 4th and 8th century CE. The point is that in 2006, the play was rendered into a Sanskrit film.

In 2016, we will have an animated film in Sanskrit, crowd-funded and crowd-sourced, titled “*Punyakoti*”. There are more than 75 dailies, weeklies and monthlies in Sanskrit. There is television news in Sanskrit. There are people who tweet in Sanskrit, including the Prime Minister. On twitter, every day, there is something called Sanskrit Appreciation Hour, an attempt to teach Sanskrit. In the state of Karnataka, there are two famous villages known as Mattur and Hosahalli. In those villages, everyone speaks Sanskrit, even today.

Unlike an “extinct” language, there is no proper definition of a “dead” language. Whatever be the definition, I don't see any signs of it being “dead”. There is a

completely different point about knowledge of Sanskrit not perceived to possess commercial value. But certainly at a forum like UNESCO's, we shouldn't talk about objects that only have commercial value, as determined in the market-place.

With this preliminary, सर्वभ्यो नमः which means नमस्ते. I bow down before all of you. Namaste. You must have heard the expression “namaste” several times, without necessarily knowing what it means. This is our way of saying “hello” in Sanskrit. “Namaste” means “I bow down before you” and it conveys a sense of humility. I am sure most of you know that “I”, with a capital, is alien to all our languages, Sanskrit included.

Most Indian languages, in greater or lesser degree, trace their roots in Sanskrit. In that sense, more than a mother tongue, Sanskrit is a grandmother tongue. Indeed, that influence extends beyond the boundaries of today's India, to elsewhere in Asia. Nepal's motto is जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपी गरीयसी. This is taken from the Valmiki Ramayana and means, “*The mother and the mother-land are superior to heaven.*” In Angor Wat, the word Angor comes from the Sanskrit नगर, meaning “city”. There are several such instances in South Asia and South East Asia.

The word संस्कृत means polished or refined. It is allied to words like संस्कृति (samskriti), meaning culture or civilization, and संस्कार (samskara), meaning purificatory ceremony or sacrament. However, don't form the impression that the language has all along been called Sanskrit. For hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years, the language was simply called भाषा (bhasha), language. We don't quite know when the language actually came to be called Sanskrit, but it was almost certainly not before the 6th century BCE. If you know a little bit about Sanskrit, you may have been told Sanskrit was spoken by the upper classes, typically males, the brahmanas and the kshatriyas, the priests and the nobles. Such propositions are advanced as definitive conclusions, beyond a shadow of doubt.

Let me relate three anecdotes about Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). Swami Vivekananda had a disciple named Sharatchandra Chakravarty and he kept a diary. This was in Bengali, but has since been translated into English. Shri Ramakrishna had a householder disciple named Nag Mahashaya (1846-99). On one occasion, in 1897,



National Emblem of Nepal with the National motto written on the red banner.

when Sharatchandra
Chakravarty was present,

another disciple, who frequently visited Nag Mahashaya, came to meet Swami Vivekananda and mentioned Nag Mahashaya. Swami Vivekananda addressed this disciple in Sanskrit and said वयं तत्वान्वेषान् मधुकर हत्वास् त्वं खलु कृती। This was a reference to Nag Mahashaya's great spiritual success. Translated, “We have been destroyed in our pursuit of the truth. O bee! You are the one who has indeed been successful.”

One of the greatest of Sanskrit poets was Kalidasa. We don't know much about his biographical details, or about when he lived and wrote, probably between the 2nd century BC and the 5th century CE. Among Kalidasa's works are Malavikagnimitram (the love story between King Agnimitra and Malavika), Abhijnanashakuntalam (the famous Shakuntala story), Vikramorvashiyam (the story of King Pururava and Urvashi), Raghuvamsha (the story of King Prabhu's dynasty), Kumarasambhava (the

birth of Kumara or Skanda), Ritusamhara (about the seasons) and Meghadutam (when the cloud was used as a messenger).

What's remarkable is not that Swami Vivekananda spoke in Sanskrit, but that he used a quote and a quote from literature. Those Sanskrit words are part of a quote and they are a quote from Kalidasa's Abhijnanashakuntalam. The Shakuntala story is about King Dushyanta and Shakuntala and King Dushyanta said this when a bee was hovering around Shakuntala's lips.

The second anecdote is about Swami Vivekananda's trip to Ernakulam, in 1892. Swami Vivekananda may have spoken in English in Chicago in 1893, and written and lectured extensively in Sanskrit, but when he travelled around the country, he conversed in Sanskrit. In Ernakulam in 1892, when someone pointed out a grammatical error in Swami Vivekananda's Sanskrit, he remarked, "*I need not follow grammar; grammar will follow me.*"

Third, there is a famous text of Vedanta, attributed to the sage Ashtavakra. As Narendranath Dutta, Swami Vivekananda used to visit Ramakrishna. At that time, Swami Vivekananda was still searching. However, Ramakrishna recognized his potential. To awaken seeds of Vedanta in Narendranath Dutta, Ramakrishna asked him to translate the Ashtavakra Gita for him, from Sanskrit to Bengali. In this respect, there was nothing unusual about Swami Vivekananda. In that day and age, many people spoke and read Sanskrit. With many languages and dialects, it was a language used for communicating among different parts of the country.

There was a famous Sanskrit poet named Sriharsha, circa 12th century CE. He wrote a great epic (Mahakavya) named Naishada Charita. This was about the famous King Nala. Nala married Damayanti, through what is called a svayamvara, a ceremony where a lady, typically a princess, chooses a husband from among assembled prospective suitors. From different parts of the country, many kings assembled for Damayanti's svayamvara. Naishada Charita tells us अन्योन्यभाषानवबोधभीते: संस्कृतिमार्भिव्यवहारवत्सु। दिग्भ्यः समेतेषु नृपेषु तेषु सौवर्गवर्गा न जनैरचिह्निन्॥ A free translation, not an exact translation, is something like this- "*There were kings who had assembled from different parts of the country. They were scared that they would not*



understand each other's mother tongues. Therefore, they conversed with each other in Sanskrit."

As a language to bridge different parts of the country, the 12th century wasn't that different from the 19th. But what of the proposition that Sanskrit was spoken by the upper class males, the brahmanas and the kshatriyas, the priests and the nobles, the elite? This is offered as a theorem, when it is no more than a hypothesis. We are talking about many thousands of years. A hypothesis true at one point of time may well be false at another point of time.

Examples are cited from plays, where the so-called elite speak in Sanskrit and the so-called hoi polloi speak in prakrita, the vernacular or colloquial language. Who were these plays for? Did ordinary citizens witness their performance? If they did, they must have understood Sanskrit. Indeed, this negates the proposition that ordinary people did not understand Sanskrit. I have already mentioned that संस्कृत means polished and it wasn't used as an appellation for the language until much later. It is perfectly possible for the elite to speak a refined form of the language, while ordinary people converse in a coarser variant.

I remember a book titled “*The King's English*”, written by the Fowler brothers in 1906. That determined correct English grammar and language. A lot of people spoke and speak cockney and slang. King's English is refined and polished, so to speak, though few people spoke it, or speak it. Am I therefore right in proposing that English is dead? There were great Sanskrit grammarians like Panini (before the 5th century BCE) and Patanjali (also 2nd century BCE, though there may have been more than one Patanjali). Too much grammar tends to kill the living character of a language. One can cite from the works of Panini and Patanjali to establish that Sanskrit was a thriving spoken language, with regional variations, when these works were written.

Patanjali's text on grammar is known as Mahabhashya. This is like a commentary on Panini's grammar text, known as Ashtadhyayi. There is a delightful [exchange] between a grammarian (वैयाकरणः) and a charioteer (सूतः), an inferior varna, in 2.4.56 of Mahabhashya. The grammarian asks the charioteer कः अस्य रथस्य प्रवेता इति। “Who is the charioteer of this chariot?” The use of the word प्रवेता for driver or charioteer was wrong. It should have been प्राजिता.

The charioteer corrects the grammarian, आयुष्मन् अहम् प्राजिता इति। “O one with a

long life! I am the driver." Perhaps understandably, the grammarian becomes angry and says ओहो खलु अनेन दुरुतेन बाध्यामहे इति। "Alas! This duruta is annoying me." The word duruta means badly-woven and was wrongly used. The grammarian meant duhsuta, or bad charioteer. The charioteer corrects him again, दुःसूतेन इति वक्तव्यम्। "One should say duhsuta." This is reminiscent of another conversation between a bard and a king. Playing on words, the bard tells the king अहं च त्वं च राजेन्द्र लोकनाथौ उभावपि। बहुत्रीहिरहं राजन् षष्ठीतत्पुरुषो भवान्।। Sanskrit is a language that flows freely, like water.

It does not like stops. It is essentially a spoken language and was rendered into writing much later. Even when it was rendered into writing, many different scripts were used. The use of Devanagari as a script is of very recent vintage. Most of the principles of Sanskrit grammar are based on this principle of letters and words freely merging into one another to form compound letters and compound words. Two of these principles are called sandhi and samasa.

The bard used two different kinds of samasa, bahuvirhi and shashthi-tatpurusha, to change the meaning entirely. The literal translation is "*O king! Both you and I are Lokanathas. I am bahuvrihi and you are shashti-tatpurusha.*" This translation doesn't make any sense to someone who doesn't know samasa. Hence, "*O king! Both you and I are Lokanathas. I am one whose master (नाथ) is the world (लोक) and you are one who is master (नाथ) of the world (लोक).*"

So much for Sanskrit being restricted to kshatriyas and brahmanas. The Vedas are ancient Sanskrit texts. The word वेद (Veda) means knowledge. The word Vedas is used both in a narrow and in a broad sense. In a narrow sense, Vedas is used for what is called the samhitas. These are mantras. There are four Vedas – Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva, associated with four kinds of priests who performed the rituals.

It is impossible to date the Vedas precisely. The earliest, the Rig Veda, probably goes back to at least 2000 BCE. एकं सत् विप्राः बहुधा वदन्ति। "Truth is one. Learned men speak of it in various ways." This is an expression you may have heard of. It comes from the Rig Veda, from I.CLXIV.46 to be precise. In a broad sense, the Vedas also include the Brahmanas, commentaries on the mantras. They also include the

Aranyakas (rituals and philosophical speculations) and the Upanishads (metaphysical speculations and philosophy).

However, the dividing line between the Aranyakas and the Upanishads is thin. The Upanishads are a treasure-house of wisdom. The word Vedanta literally means the end of the Vedas and is a term used for the Upanishads, as well as some subsequent texts. If you have been to India, or are familiar with India, you may have noticed the national motto, also embossed on currency notes.

If I write a letter to you, this expression will be on my letter-head. This states सत्यमेव जयते, satyameva jayate, truth alone triumphs. This quote comes from the Mundaka Upanishad. Perhaps I should quote the shloka in its entirety. सत्यमेव जयते नानुतं सत्येन पन्था विततो देवयानः। येनाक्रमन्त्यृष्यो हयाप्तकामा यत्र तत् सत्यस्य परमं निधानम्॥ “*Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood.*”

It is through truth that the path of the gods is laid out. It is by following this that the sages obtained their wishes and reached the supreme foundation of truth.” How many Upanishads are there? This isn’t a question that can be easily answered. There are major Upanishads and there are minor ones. Depending on which ones you include, the major Upanishads number 11 to 13. There are 100-200 minor Upanishads.

This entire corpus, Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads are part of what is called the shruti tradition. They are revelation, they weren’t composed by any human agent, as per the Indian tradition. There were rishis or sages who composed the mantras. However, strictly speaking, they weren’t composers or authors. These were revealed to them. The shruti tradition is distinct from the smriti tradition. Smriti texts had human authors. The Bhagavad Gita forms part of the great epic, the Mahabharata, and represents Krishna’s teachings to Arjuna on the eve of the Kurukshetra War. It derives its essence from the Upanishads.

Despite this, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita were actually composed by the sage Krishna Dvaipayana Vedavyasa. As such, the Bhagavad Gita is a smriti text, not a shruti text. I mentioned rishis. In the Rig Veda, one can count a total of 407 rishis. 21 of these were women. If one propounds the hypothesis regardless of timelines, it is



Discourse of Krishna and Arjuna in [Kurukshetra](#)

hence impossible to prove that Sanskrit was spoken exclusively by males.

Since 2003, India has a National Mission for Manuscripts (Namami). This has a gargantuan task of listing, digitizing, publishing and translating manuscripts — a manuscript is defined as a text more than 75 years old. This manuscript wealth isn't necessarily in public hands. Hence, surveys are used to estimate what's in private collections. As of now, Namami has a listing/ digitization of three million and the estimated stock of manuscripts in India is 35 million. There are at least 60,000 manuscripts in Europe and another 1,50,000 elsewhere in South Asia. Ninety-five per cent of these manuscripts have never been listed, collated and translated.

To give some idea of how large 35 million is, since the advent of printing, an estimated 130 million books have been published in all languages of the world. Most people here will have heard of Kautilya (350—275 BCE) and the text on political economy and governance that he authored, titled Arthashastra. I don't know how many of you know that the manuscript of Arthashastra had been lost. It was rediscovered by R. Shamastry in 1904, published in 1909 and translated into English

in 1915. Who knows how many such treasures lie hidden in the form of manuscripts?

Kautilya's Arthashastra



Translated into English by
R. Shama Sastry

Let me reiterate what I said earlier. Writing is new in Sanskrit and writing in the

Devanagari script came even later. Even when the language was Sanskrit, the script may have been something that few people know how to read today. The sharada script, widely used in Kashmir once, is an example. I have asked several learned people – how many people can read sharada today? The invariable answer is, one or two, but no one seems to know who these one or two individuals are. There was also something called Brihatkatha, a collection of stories written by Gunadhya in 6th century CE. This was in a language called paishachi and both Brihatkatha and the paishachi language have vanished.

To compound the problem, knowledge was transmitted verbally, not in written form, through a guru-shishya or preceptor-disciple mode. We have no idea of how much knowledge has been lost in the process. Take the Rig Veda as an example. Originally, this was believed to have 21 shakhas, schools or recensions. The Yajur Veda had 101 shakhas. The Sama Veda had 1000 shakhas. The Atharva Veda had 9 shakhas. Together, the four Vedas had 1131 shakas. Now, there are only 13 left. What has been irretrievably lost is beyond redemption. Let us at least save what remains.

I have erred in two ways. First, I have conveyed the impression that all the manuscripts are in Sanskrit. They aren't. Roughly two-thirds are in Sanskrit. However, there are other languages too, Arabic and Pali are examples. I have also conveyed the impression that all Sanskrit texts are connected to Hinduism. They aren't. Many Buddhist and Jain texts were written in Sanskrit. There is a text known as Amara-Kosha, also known as Namalinganushasana. This was authored by a Sanskrit grammarian and poet, named Amara Sinha (4th century CE). This text is a bit like a dictionary or thesaurus and is probably one of the earliest in the world.

Surprise of surprises, it is used by students of Sanskrit even today, as something to refer to. I have it on my I-pad. Though we don't know much about Amara Sinha's personal life, he clearly seems to have been a Buddhist. There is a book titled "*A Companion to Sanskrit Literature*", authored by Sures Chandra Banerji. This was originally published in 1971 and has gone through several editions since. This volume traverses 3000 years of Sanskrit literature and has an entire chapter on the contribution of Muslims to Sanskrit. By the way, this isn't the only such documentation. Since 1971, other books have also documented this contribution.

I used the word philosophy earlier. The Sanskrit word darshana is better, since it carries a nuance of insight. Traditionally, there were six schools of darshana – samkhya, yoga, nyaya, vaisheshika, purva mimasa and uttara mimasa (Vedanta). Add to that the agama and tantra literature, both less orthodox and unconventional. To the extent they survive, they are generally in Sanskrit. While these are triggered by what can broadly be called the metaphysical and spiritual, they also get into areas that are less obviously religious. This is true in greater measure when we get into the Vedangas, meaning, limbs of the Vedas.

Traditionally, there are six of these – shiksha (phonetics), kalpa (rituals), vyakarana (grammar), nirukta (etymology), Chhanda (metre) and jyotisha (astronomy). The rules formalized by Panini in his work on grammar have influenced the development of formal language theory. The kalpa branch led to the development of the shulba sutras. Along this line, the work of Apastamba (450-350 BCE) and Baudhayana (8th to 7th century BCE) led to mathematical advances like the Pythagorean theorem, Pythagorean triples and the square root of 2, the last leading to the notion of irrational numbers.

One should not misunderstand. One should not look for axiomatic step by step deductive proofs. Instead, in 1.11 of Baudhayana's shulba sutra, one will have a statement like the following. दीर्घचतुरश्रस्याक्षणयारज्जुः पाश्वमानी तिर्यग्मानी च यत् पृथग्भूते कुरुतस्तदुभयं करोति॥ Translated, “When a rope is stretched along the length of the diagonal, it produces an area which is what the vertical and the horizontal sides make together.”

Geometry was important because the shulba sutras were about constructions of sacrificial altars. Jyotisha led to the work of Aryabhatta (476-550 CE), Varahamihira (505-587 CE), Brahmagupta (598-665 CE) and Bhaskara (600-680 CE). These works were in Sanskrit and the contributions in geometry, trigonometry, algebra and combinatorics have been sufficiently well documented. Combinatorics reminds me of chhanda shastra and the work of Pingala (probably 1st century CE).

The structure of Sanskrit prosody was different. Rhyming was unimportant. Instead, there was a very tight structure of metres, into what can be light and heavy syllables.

There were fewer metres in Vedic Sanskrit. But as Vedic Sanskrit morphed into classical Sanskrit, there were at least 1000 different metres. Pingala's work took him to a binary number system, combinatorics, the binomial theorem and Fibonacci numbers.

Lest I forget, I should mention Ayurveda, treatises on medicine. Literally, Ayurveda is better translated as knowledge of life. There was the work of Charaka (2nd century CE), which was more about medicine and anatomy, and there was the work of Sushruta (1st century CE), which was about medicine and surgery. Note that the original texts of the Sushruta Samhita and the Charaka Samhita no longer survive. Note that works on dhanurveda (science of war and fighting) rarely survive too. The Dharmashastras still determine much of ethics and good behavior.

The mention of prosody takes me to the realm of Sanskrit literature and there is a huge corpus there. The Sanskrit word for poet is kavi, which actually means a wise person. The earliest poet was Valmiki, composer of the Valmiki Ramayana. Valmiki was the first poet, adi kavi. I used the word shloka earlier. Shloka means a couplet. Have you wondered about the origin of the word shloka?

The story goes that the sage Valmiki went to the banks of the river Tamasa to have a bath. A couple of curlews (krouncha) were making love. Along came a hunter and shot down the male curlew. The female curlew lamented at this. Valmiki was stirred by compassion and wanted to curse the hunter. However, this curse got transformed into the first couplet ever, in a metre known as anushtubh, a favoured metre in both the Valmiki Ramayana and the Mahabharata. मा निषाद् प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमः शाश्वतीः समाः | यत्क्रौंचमिथुनादेकमवधीः काममोहितम्॥ “O hunter! Since you have slain one of two curlews when they were engaged in an act of love, you will obtain ill-fame for an eternity.” The word shoka means sorrow.

Since the couplet was composed against the background of sorrowing, this couplet came to be known as shloka. So the Valmiki Ramayana tells us. Just as Valimiki composed the Ramayana, the sage Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa composed the Mahabharata. There were two great dynasties in India, the solar dynasty and the lunar dynasty. The Ramayana is the story of the solar dynasty, while the Mahabharata is the story of the lunar dynasty. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are not regarded as

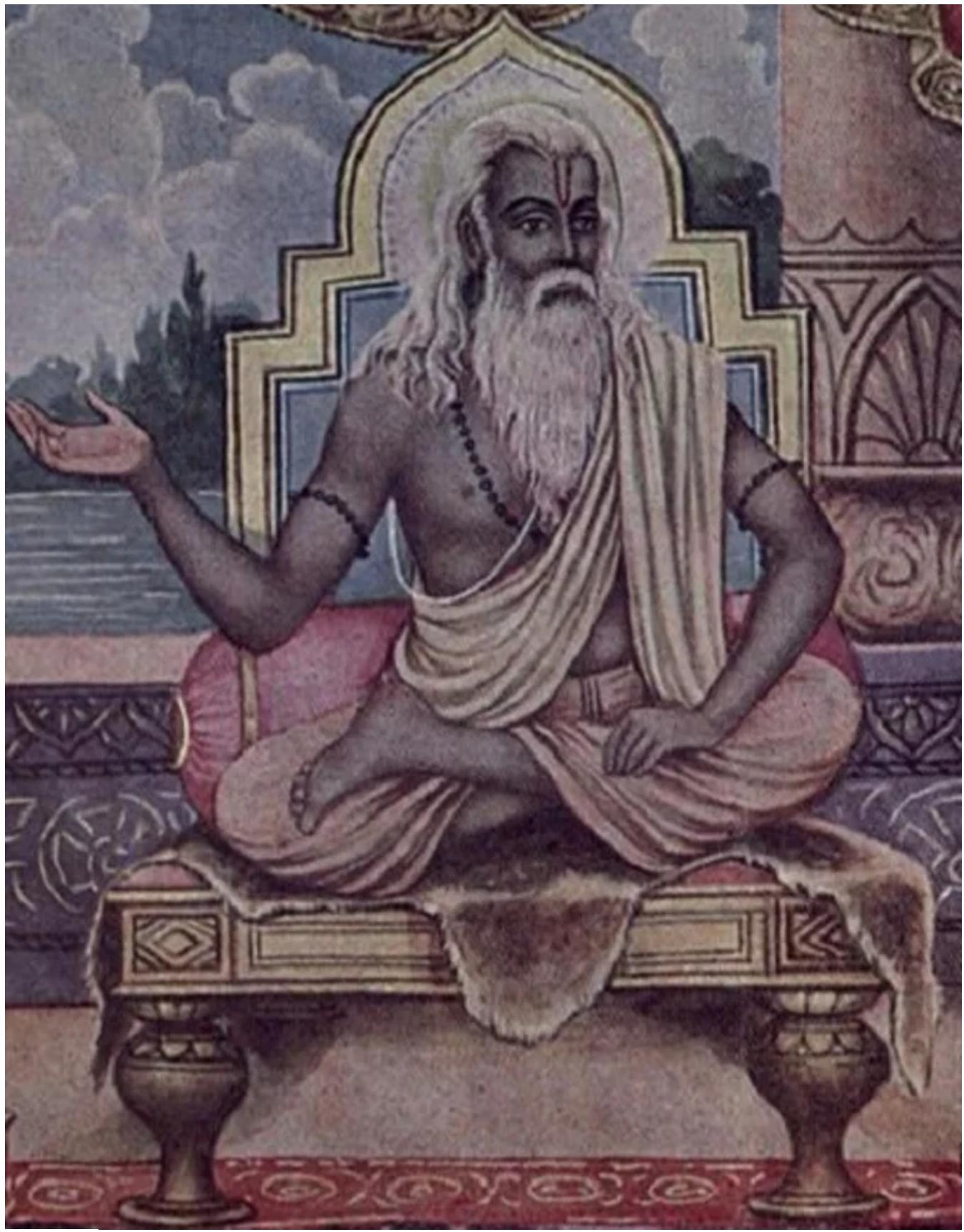
fiction. They are called itihasa, meaning, this is indeed what happened. They are believed to represent history.

To give you some idea of the size, the Valmiki Ramayana has 25,000 shlokas, while the Mahabharata has 100,000. After composing the Mahabharata, Vyasa composed the eighteen major Puranas. The Puranas are ancient accounts. There are major Puranas and minor Puranas. The eighteen major Puranas collectively amount to 400,000 shlokas.

Sanskrit literature started to flourish during what is called the classical period, say 3rd century CE onwards. We had great playwrights like Shudraka, Bhasa, Ashvaghosa and Kalidasa. There was a famous text known as natya shastra (2nd century CE), a treatise on stagecraft. There were collections of popular tales, like Panchatantra and Hitopadesha. There was poetry by Kalidasa, Bharavi, Magha and Sriharsha. There were authors like Banabhatta, Vatsyayana and Bhartihari. The list goes on and on. Volumes have been written on this amazing corpus. How can I hope to give you a flavor in the course of a brief talk? You should read it for yourself. But let me give you a few more examples.

शुष्कं काष्ठं तिष्ठति अग्रे। “A dry piece of wood is in front.” I have just mentioned the great poet Banabhatta. One of his sons, Bhushanabhatta, was also a great poet. There is a story that Banabhatta wished to decide which of his sons was better, as a poet. The sentence above is what the first son produced. When it came to Bhushanabhatta’s turn, he produced **नीरसः तरुवरः पुरतः भाति**. The words have exactly the same meaning. Unlike **शुष्कं**, which only means “dry”, **नीरसः** means “without juice”. **काष्ठं** means “wood”, while **तरुवरः** means “great tree”. More than the meaning, the sound has got completely transformed. **शुष्कं काष्ठं तिष्ठति अग्रे। नीरसतरुवरः पुरतः भाति**. One is poetry, the other is not.

There is a story that once, King Bhoja and Kalidasa had a disagreement and Kalidasa left Dhara and went to live somewhere else. While he was there, a message was brought to him that King Bhoja had died. Kalidasa was distraught and composed the following shloka. Though they had quarreled, Kalidasa still retained a lot of affection for King Bhoja. **अद्य धारा निराधारा निरालम्बा सरस्वती। पण्डिताः खण्डिताः सर्वे भोजराजे**



Vyasa दिवं गते॥ “Today, Dhara is without a foundation. The goddess Sarasvati is without support. All the learned men are disappointed or abandoned. King Bhoja has gone to heaven.” A beautiful shloka, but there was a problem.

King Bhoja hadn't actually died, that was wrong information. When Kalidasa realized that he had been misled, he rejoiced. As for the shloka, did it have to be abandoned?

Not quite. Kalidasa changed it to the following. अद्य धारा सदाधारा सदालम्बा
सरस्वती। पण्डिताः पण्डिताः सर्वं भोजराजे भुवं गते॥ A little bit of tweaking and the entire
meaning changes. “*With King Bhoja having gone to earth, Dhara always has a support and the goddess Sarasvati always has a support. All the learned men are adorned.*” You will say that it needed a Kalidasa to do this. That’s undoubtedly true. But you also needed the Sanskrit language to do this. There are very few languages in the world where you could have done this. That’s the beauty of Sanskrit.

Since Kalidasa is one of my favourite Sanskrit poets, I can go on and on about him. I have already mentioned मेघदूतम्. This means “cloud-messenger”. It is impossible to capture the beauty in any English translation. There is nothing in the story. In fact, it is amazing that a poet should have composed a poem with no story-line, so to speak. Kubera is the lord of riches and the lord of the yakshas and he lives in Alakapuri, on Mount Kailasha.

One of these yakshas has been negligent in his duties and Kubera banishes him from Alakapuri for one year. He is banished to some place in the central parts of India. There, he pines for his beloved wife, who is in Alakapuri. It is the monsoon season and the yaksha decides to send a message to his beloved. He uses the cloud as a messenger.

The Purvamegha part of the poem is about the cloud’s journey to Alakapuri and has 66 shlokas. The Uttaramegha part of the poem is about the cloud’s return from Alakapuri and has 55 shlokas. The beauty of the poem is in the description of nature. What is the Sanskrit for a mushroom? There are several and one is शिलिन्ध. Have you heard of any poet in the world bringing something like a mushroom into poetry? I haven’t. Here is the first part of shloka 11. कर्तुं यच्च प्रभवति महीमुच्छलीन्धामवन्ध्यां. “*You are capable of making that ground fertile and make mushrooms sprout from it.*”

Let us move on to shloka 18. छन्नोपान्तः परिणतफलदयोतिभिः काननामैस्त्वर्यारुद्धे
शिखरमचलः स्निधवेणीसवर्णे। नूनं यास्यत्यमरमिथूनप्रेक्षणीयामवस्थां मृद्ये श्यामः स्तन
इव भुवः शेषविस्तारपाण्डुः॥ “*You have climbed up the peak of the mountain and the extremities are full of ripe mangos in the orchards and their complexion is affecting the hue. As you have climbed up the mountain, because of your complexion, it looks as*

if a lady's braided hair is lying atop the slope. From above, a couple of immortals will certainly think that this is a sight worth looking at. It is like a breast of the earth, dark in the centre and pale at the ends." What is left implicit is that this is the image of a pregnant lady's breast.

This is the monsoon and soon, the earth will also begin to yield crops. Meghadutam is nothing but stuff like this. How can this be translated? Don't even bother to read a translation. Read the Sanskrit. Meghadutam represents the young Kalidasa at work, with poetry churned out of nowhere, that is, out of a cloud. His more mature works came later.

I am going to move on to Magha. He was from 7th century ACE, in what was then Gujarat, and is now Rajasthan. Magha (Maagha) may have written several works, but the only one that has survived is Shishupala Vadha. Most people know the story of Krishna beheading Shishupala and this mahakavya (great epic) is about that incident. About Magha it has been said, उपमा कालिदासस्य भारवेरर्थगौरवं| दण्डनः पदलालित्यं माधे सन्ति त्रयो गुणाः॥ We have four Sanskrit poets mentioned in that couplet – Kalidasa, Bharavi, Dandin and Magha. "*Kalidasa's similes (metaphors), the deep purport of Bharavi's words, the beauty of Dandin's words – all three qualities are to be found in Magha.*"

Shishupala Vadha has 20 sargas. Indeed, it is a mahakavya and many connoisseurs of Sanskrit poetry have raved about Magha. The ingenuity reaches a crescendo in the 19th sarga. Sanskrit poetry had a concept of चित्रकाव्य. चित्र has many meanings – picture, wonderful, excellent. So these are wonderful decorative compositions. For example, how about composing a shloka with the first pada (quatrains) entirely in ज, the second pada entirely in त, the third pada entirely in भ and the fourth pada entirely in र? Magha came up with जजौजोजाजिजिज्जाजी तं ततोऽतितताततुत्। भाभोऽभीभाभिभूभाभू- रारारिररिरीरः॥ Believe it or not, this means "*Then the warrior, winner of war, with his heroic valour, the subduer of the extremely arrogant beings, he who has the brilliance of stars, he who has the brilliance of the vanquisher of fearless elephants, the enemy seated on a chariot, began to fight.*"

Here is another example, composed only with भ and र.

भूरिभिर्भूरिभिर्भूराभूभौरभिरभिरे। भेरीरेभिरभिरभ्राभैरभीरुभिरभैरिभा:॥ This means, “The fearless elephant, who was like a burden to the earth because of its weight, whose sound was like a kettle-drum, and who was like a dark cloud, attacked the enemy elephant.” As a third example, composed only with द, दाददो दुद्दुद्दादी दाददो दूदीददोः। दुद्दादं दददे दुद्दे दादादददोऽददः॥ The meaning is, “Sri Krishna, the giver of every boon, the scourge of the evil-minded, the purifier, the one whose arms can annihilate the wicked who cause suffering to others, shot his pain-causing arrow at the enemy.”

Magha also specialized in palindromes. Here is one. वारणागगभीरा सा

साराभीगगणारवा। कारितारिवधा सेना नासेधा वारितारिका॥ The translation is, “*It is very difficult to face this army which is endowed with elephants as big as mountains. This is a very great army and the shouting of frightened people is heard. It has slain its enemies.*”

Notice that each line is a palindrome, read right to left. Magha was partly trying to rival Bharavi. Bharavi wrote a mahakavya titled Kiratarjuniya and that was replete with palindromes too. This work was about the duel between Arjuna and Shiva, the latter in the garb of a hunter. Ignoring the Bharavi palindromes, here is another remarkable example from Bharavi. विकाशमीयुर्जगतीशमार्गणा

विकाशमीयुर्जगतीशमार्गणाः। विकाशमीयुर्जगतीशमार्गणा विकाशमीयुर्जगतीशमार्गणाः॥ The words only seem to repeat themselves.

However, the meaning is quite different. “The arrows (mārgaṇāḥ), of the king (jagatīśa) Arjuna spread out (vikāśam īyuh). The arrows (mārgaṇāḥ), of the lord of the earth (jagatīśa), Lord Śiva, spread out (vikāśam īyuh). The Gaṇas (gaṇāḥ) who are the slayers of demons (jagatīśamār) rejoiced (vikāśam īyuh). The seekers (mārgaṇāḥ) of Lord Śiva (jagatīśa), i.e. the deities and sages, reached (īyuh) the sky (vikāśam) (to watch the battle).”

One last example and I am done. Bhaskaracharya was a famous Indian mathematician and astronomer (1114-1185 CE). He is also known as Bhaskara-II. Leelavati is both the name of a text (actually part of a text) that he wrote and Leelavati is also believed to have been the name of his daughter. Many of the problems are addressed to Leelavati and Leelavati also seems to have composed some of them. इन्द्रः वायुर्यमश्चैव नैरृतो मध्यमस्तथा । ईशानश्च कुबेरश्च अग्निर्वरुण एव च ॥ The one given above is one

such, composed by Leelavati. Why was this important enough to be written down in the form of a shloka?

It is just the names of various gods. Actually, not just any gods. This gives the names of lokapalas. Lokapalas are protectors or guardians of the world. There are 10 directions. If you leave out above and below, there are 8. These are north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-west, west and north-west. North, south, east and west have specific Sanskrit names as directions. Vayu is the guardian of the north-west, Kubera of the north, Ishana of the north-east, Indra of the east, Agni of the south-east, Yama of the south, Nairrta of the south-west and Varuna of the west.

Vayu	Kubera	Ishana
Varuna		Indra
Nairrta	Yama	Agni

But what's the point of the shloka? Why write out a shloka that only lists the names of the lokapalas? We know their names. Follow the order listed by Leelavati, Indra is the first, Vayu is the second, Yama is the third and so on. Madhyama means middle, there is no guardian there. Fill in the matrix below in the order in which Leelavati has listed the names.

2	7	6
9	5	1
4	3	8

It is a 3X3 magic square, with the sums along all rows, all columns and all diagonals adding up to 15. So that's what she was doing. She wasn't writing down any odd shloka, she was actually constructing a magic square. Interesting? Sanskrit is littered with such nuggets. If we don't learn and read Sanskrit, all this will be lost.

Sanskrit is a great wonder and it is a great heritage. India's Human Resource Development Ministry set up a Committee to recommend a long-term vision and road-map for the development of Sanskrit. The Report was submitted recently and is available [here](#). It will be a great pity if Sanskrit ever becomes a “dead” language.