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Dr. Malavi N

Post Doctoral Fellow (UGC),

Department of Sanskrit,

University of Madras,

Chennai, India

## Can we please review the teaching methods of saṁskṛta in schools and colleges?

Dr. Malavi N

### Abstract

**Purpose:** To create awareness among Indians regarding the necessity to improve the teaching methods of saṁskṛta in schools and colleges, to work out the pedagogy that will make saṁskṛta studies come out of the institutional constraints that are currently imposed on the language.

**Problem:** Post-independence, there is a steep fall in the quality of saṁskṛta-studies in schools and colleges. Indians are unaware of the fact that they are made to read saṁskṛta in a method which may suit the English language, but is most unsuitable for saṁskṛta. Only the traditional way will help. Translations and writing new textbooks everyday will not help.

**Method:** Contemporary examples are shown to support the concerned argument.

**Conclusion:** Saṁskṛta scholars should interfere in the pedagogy of saṁskṛta-studies in a united manner and bring about changes in the school and college syllabi as soon as possible.

**Keywords:** Teaching methods, saṁskṛta, schools, colleges

### Introduction

At the outset, I would like to state that I have not gone into the details of what all has already been said on this subject in the past since I feel such things, how many ever times they are stated, are worth the effort if the necessary changes are going to be brought about ASAP. I am also transgressing the generally agreed rigidity about using the first person in essays because I never believe in listening to instructions from unknown sources. I will listen to the *Vedas*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bhagavadgītā* etc and try my level best to abide by the rules that these lay down, but, am not willing at all to listen to what man-made institutions like schools or colleges, that too with a western background, try to impose on me. For example, I simply do not want to make my children wear shoes and socks to school just because the school asks me to, because it really does not make sense to wear them in a place like Chennai, where for most of the year, *Sūryabhagavān* is at his hottest best. The British wear shoes and socks to school because they record a hottest temperature of 19 °C and a coldest temperature of 5 °C; does that imply that we have to wear the same shoes to school in a place which records a hottest temperature of 33°C and a coldest temperature of 25 °C, just because we are having to use the school system that was thrust upon us by the British at the time of colonization? Due to the heat and humidity, the socks and shoes stink, the children's feet get sore and it is an *anarthaparamparā* . . . So, if you can appreciate the rebel in me, kindly read on.

Schools introduce *saṁskṛta* at Class III or V generally. The reason stated in most places is that children can assimilate *saṁskṛta* only at the minimum age of 10 years, apparently because it is a very complex language. However, if it is a complex language, it would be more fruitful to introduce it as early as possible so that the foundation itself can be strong. If it is introduced as II language only at Class V, naturally, students of *saṁskṛta* can reach only a lower level in the language than the level that those who read their regional language as II language from class I itself can achieve. Therefore, the standard achievable in school is lesser in *saṁskṛta* when compared to other languages such as Hindi, Tamil etc.

The number of students taking to *saṁskṛta* is dwindling day by day. It will be the responsibility of the fraternity of the *saṁskṛta* scholars to inspire students when they are having *saṁskṛta* as a subject in school itself so that they take to *saṁskṛta* by choice in higher education. Scholars, though they may be involved in delving deep into the *śāstra* frontiers,

### Correspondence

Dr. Malavi N

Post Doctoral Fellow (UGC),

Department of Sanskrit,

University of Madras,

Chennai, India

should also spend a part of their time to teach *saṃskṛta* as a language to students because a very sound knowledge of the language is first required to later develop the knowledge of various *śāstras* and only very able-teachers can do so in an interest-catching manner. Let us take up the example of the system followed in the traditional *pāṭhaśālās*. A person who has done *ghanānta-vedādhyayana* handles students at all levels – students who have just started their *vedādhyayana*, those who are about to finish *saṃhitā*, then *lakṣaṇa* and finally, *ghana*. It is not like a graduate handles primary classes, a post graduate handles middle and secondary classes and Ph.D holders handle high school and college. It is only natural that a person who has gone higher up in the education-ladder handles the *ārambhapāṭha* better than a person who has climbed the ladder only halfway. Even if teaching for beginners by scholars will be next to impossible, it is stated here that their supervision is extremely essential. If we have to provide basic training in *saṃskṛta* in school in an inspiring way, we have to project the language as a brain-teaser and not as ‘Sanskrit Made Easy’. Even exposing students to a bit of *pāṇinīya-vyākaraṇa* or *navya-nyāya* will make them aware in full magnitude of what awaits them if they pursue *saṃskṛta* in their higher education.

Bitter, but it is a fact. Let us face it. Two generations back, a person who took to modern education at least had a *saṃskṛta* scholar for a father. So, he knew the value of what he had failed to learn from his father and knew he had to be proud of it. Next, his son got to see a *saṃskṛta* scholar only in his grandfather and was not as much respectful towards the language as his father was. Next in queue is the great-grandson who has neither seen nor heard of the *saṃskṛta* scholar – great-grandfather and is also not in the least bothered that a tradition has been lost . . . Let me substantiate this. Recently, I presented a paper in *saṃskṛta* in a National seminar and I posted a notification about the same in a WhatsApp group comprising of my family members, where there is generally enormous response from both youngsters and elders for birthday wishes etc. However, only my uncles and aunts responded to my message about the paper-presentation in *saṃskṛta* and there was absolute silence from all of my cousins. Their silence can only be attributed to their lack of knowledge and hence, lack of interest in the subject, and not because they are busy in their own work, if that were the case, they should not be active participants in birthday wishes’ threads as well. This being the present situation, the only way to avoid further deterioration is to take all efforts to make more youngsters to read *saṃskṛta* to a very good level at school itself so that they later specialise in *saṃskṛta* itself and become the torch-bearers of our tradition tomorrow. If all *saṃskṛta* scholars of today were to make their children also to take up *saṃskṛta* as their main stay, it would be a great beginning.

The number of *vidyārthis* for *saṃskṛta* degrees is always one among the least compared to other departments. Hence, there are generally no new appointments in the faculty. The existing faculty also constantly faces the danger of the department being shut down due to alarmingly low student strength. Therefore, they decrease the standard of the syllabus so that even mediocre students can cope with it, thinking this may trigger some students to join the department. This, however, results in the department’s inability to quench the knowledge-thirst of those intellectually inclined students, though they may be few in number. This actually means we are not giving them the opportunity to be the best in their field. These students, in turn, end up being mediocre teachers for the next

generation and again, what a vicious circle this is . . . This is the status in Chennai. If it is better in the rest of India, that is heartening.

The concept of research is characteristic to the western education and obviously, it does not suit the Indian *śāstra* system very much. Most of us start reading *saṃskṛta* seriously after secondary education (Class X) or after senior secondary education (Class XII) or even after graduation. This means that after 5 years (or maximum 7 years) of education in the *saṃskṛta* department, we are expected to do research and present some original work for the Ph.D degree. This forces scholars to take up some manuscript and do a critical edition of it so that it can be projected as original work. Only 20% or 30% of the Ph.D theses are of real relevance to us. Also, this is done at a stage when their training itself in that particular *śāstra* is not complete. The Ph.D of today is somewhat equivalent to the *kroḍapatra* of yesteryears which was written by scholars (in the real sense) who had read the *Vedas*, *kāvya-pāṭha*, *vyākaraṇa* (till atleast a minimum level), and then the respective *śāstra* in all its glory. Isn’t this the stage where some relevant and original work can be expected from a scholar? How big is the gap between a scholar who wrote a *kroḍapatra* in the past and a Ph.D scholar of today?

I tried my hand at teaching for a short period of 4 months as lecturer for part-II *saṃskṛta* for students whose major was science, accounts etc. I was expected to teach the *Nīṭisataka* of Bhatrhari to a group of 60 students, half of them not having even *akṣarābhyāsa*. The justification provided by the syllabus-setter is thus – what are the students going to do with basic *saṃskṛta* knowledge if we teach from the alphabets? By reading *Nīṭisataka*, they atleast learn good values, but, one wonders, is this a value education class or a *saṃskṛta* class! The result is that *saṃskṛta* becomes a laughing stock in front of those students and they even lose the little respect they may have had for the language. Teaching of the *Nīṭisataka* to non-knowers of the *saṃskṛta-akṣaras* is somewhat similar to the reading *Vedānta (Veda+anta)* by a person who fails to satisfy the pre-requisites mentioned in the *Vedānta* books - *adhikārī tu vidhivadadhīvedavedāngatvenāpātato dhigatākhilavedārtho'smiñjanmani janmāntare vā kāmyaniśiddhavarjanapurāḥsaram nityanaimittika-prāyaścittopāsānānuṣṭhānena nirgatanikhilakalmaṣatayā nitāntanirmalasvāntaḥ sādhana-catuṣṭayasampannaḥ pramātā*<sup>1</sup>

Scholars are facing some friction when it comes to submitting their thesis in *saṃskṛta*-medium. The faculty, having the best interests of the students in heart, advise students to pen their thesis in English, so that it will have better reach. Here, I argue that to a person who cannot comprehend the *saṃskṛta* language, of what relevance is the content of a PhD thesis about *saṃskṛta* going to be for him? Instead of we compromising for his sake and writing our thesis in English, let us write in *saṃskṛta* alone; let him read *saṃskṛta* first and then read and enjoy the thesis.

The reason for writing this article in English instead of *saṃskṛta*, though seemingly ironical to what was said above, is this - better reach, even among *saṃskṛta* students and teachers. The following incident will provide enough testimony to the fact that among those holding various degrees in *saṃskṛta*, there are many who do not know to write or speak properly in *saṃskṛta*. I recently attended an interview for a prestigious fellowship in *saṃskṛta*. There, a student who also attended the interview was beside herself with fury because the judges asked her to speak in *saṃskṛta*. She seemingly replied to them that only *Hindī* showed her the

way to *saṃskṛta*, so, she will speak only in *Hindī* and not in *saṃskṛta*. Is her inability to speak in *saṃskṛta* being feigned as her devotion to *Hindī* here? On a positive note, the same judges just saw that another student's synopsis was written in *saṃskṛta* and said '*Saṃskṛtam, śobhanam!*' and maybe this was instrumental in her selection for the fellowship. Kudos to the judges who gave so much weightage to the paper being penned in *saṃskṛta*.

Even an Indian toddler is trained nowadays to say there are 26 alphabets in English and rhymes are taught even to new-borns and mothers are talking to children in English. Contrastingly, the son of a *saṃskṛta* scholar is scratching his head when asked how many alphabets are there in *saṃskṛta*. Though many prestigious institutions are taking *saṃskṛta*-studies forward in a highly accelerated manner in India, blood boils when the amount of

1 – *Vedāntasāra* –

<https://archive.org/details/vedantasaraofsad00sada> - page 122  
degradation in *saṃskṛta*-studies in India post-independence is considered.

To conclude, it is stated here that a language does not stop with just being a medium of communication. It shapes up our thinking faculty, general biology (because of the articulation of *akṣaras* characteristic to that language), food, culture (through its literature) etc. For example, teaching more of English exposes children to words like cookies, cakes and chocolates right from a small age. Hence, they constantly pesture us to buy cakes and chocolates and they never ask for *murukku* (South-Indian savoury) or *laddoo* with such adamancy. Indians, or rather schools (because they ultimately mould the next generation) should teach *saṃskṛta* or a regional language with the vigour that is currently employed for English. English has to be compulsorily taught to a very good level for the sake of worldly competence, but, what is important here is that students should be told that they are reading English only as a consequence of the British colonisation. They cannot survive in the world without English knowledge, but, it is not at all necessary to develop a passion for the language (tolerance is enough), whereas, there is an absolute necessity to develop a great passion for *saṃskṛta* or a regional language. Reading *saṃskṛta* or regional language as the I language is extremely essential for school students; reading mathematics or science in regional language or *saṃskṛta* will not be that fruitful as it will be cumbersome to create the syllabus and textbooks. Also, it will not have much value in the outside world. On the other hand, reading mathematics or science in English medium will be enough to gather knowledge of English as a language too. There is no necessity to read it separately as a language, and that too, as the I language.

Signing off with the hope that all institutions will be *saṃskṛta-kendras* imparting *saṃskṛta* knowledge (not saanskriT – all students and teachers are requested to use the correct pronunciation) in the highest level as was the case before the British colonisation

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