



**ROLE OF SANSKRIT IN THE
DEVELOPMENT AND
UPDATION OF AYURVEDA**

(Compilation of Seminar Papers)

**Edited by
DR.S.S.VIVEKANANDAN**

**DEPARTMENT OF NYAYA
GOVT. SANSKRIT COLLEGE
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ISBN 978-81-922232-6-1



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Seminar papers edited by Dr.S.S.Vivekanandan, Asst.Prof. & Head,
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First Edition : 2016

Published by

**DEPARTMENT OF NYAYA, GOVT. SANSKRIT COLLEGE,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM – 695034, KERALA, INDIA**

ISBN 978-81-922232-6-1

Printed at: New Genial Printers,
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

CONTENT

1. SANSKRIT FOR EVERY INDIAN AND EVERY INDIAN
FOR SANSKRIT **DR. G. ASOKAN** 07-13
2. SANSKRIT – THE LIFE OF AYURVEDA.
DR. P. NARASIMHAN 14-18
3. ESTABLISH THE ROLE OF NIRUKTA TO UNDERSTAND
AYURVEDA BETTER. **DR. K.K.SUNDARESAN** 19-21
4. THE NECESSITY OF SANSKRIT IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND
RESEARCHES IN AYURVEDA. **DR.RANI SAYED** 22-25
5. APPLICATION OF TANTRA YUKTI IN *DĪRGHAÑJĪVITAMADHYAYAM*
OF CHARAKA SAMHITA **DR.JAYASHANKAR MUND** 26-37
6. TEXTS AND PHYSICIANS: ROLE OF SANSKRIT IN APPRECIATING
AYURVEDIC PRINCIPLES AND ITS ROLE IN CLINICAL PRACTICE.
DR. MANOJ SANKARANARAYANA 38-43
7. INFLUENCE OF SANSKRIT LANGUAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
AYURVEDA IN KERALA. **DR. BRAIVIN CAMLY** 44-49
8. TEXTUAL INTERPRETATIONS OF AYURVEDA SAMHITA
BASED ON TANTRA GUNA & TANTRA DOSHA.
DR. LEENA P NAIR 50-53
9. SANSKRIT IN CONTEMPORARY KNOWLEDGE SITUATION
DR.G.NARAYANAN 54-60
10. MAIMEDNESS IN THE STUDY OF AYURVEDA WITHOUT
SANSKRIT **DR.S.S.VIVEKANANDAN** 61-63
11. AROGYAKALPADRUMAM AND VAIDYAGRANTHAMALA -
PROMINENT KERALIATE AYURVEDIC WORKS OF KAIKKULANGARA
RAMAVARIYAR **DR.M.SATHIAN** 64-68
12. THE ROLE OF SANSKRIT GRAMMAR IN UNDERSTANDING
AYURVEDA SAMHITA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
KRIT PRATYAYAS. **P.V.RAMADAS** 69-74
13. AN INEVITABLE CONVERSION: BUDDHIST SANSKRIT AND
SOCIETAL ASPECT OF MEDICINE. **DR. SMITHA SABU** 75-78
14. ROLE OF VAKYASHA, VAKYARTHASHA AND
ARTHAVAYAVASHA IN UNDERSTANDING SAMHITA.
DR.HAROON IRSHAD 79-87

9. SANSKRIT IN CONTEMPORARY KNOWLEDGE SITUATION

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Today, the approach towards knowledge, its production and dissemination is rather a complex phenomenon determined by social and political conditions prevailing in the society. That is every piece of information is analyzed in accordance with theories and ideologies that have influence among the intelligentsia in the society. There for, the knowledge and the medium, both undergo severe evaluation and criticism. Sanskrit for being one of the active components of Indian culture it cannot keep away from the contemporary discourse.

Sanskrit and Indian knowledge systems

Indian knowledge systems were taught and preserved in Sanskrit language right from the beginning of the systems. Or the available literature of these systems is, mainly or wholly, in Sanskrit language. These systems include a whole range of subjects varying from religious to secular and technical and scientific to fine arts. Thus we can find philosophy, literature, poetics, statecraft and administration, language and allied topics, medicine- human, veterinary and plant, mathematics- arithmetic and astronomy, the mythical treatises of religious significance etc., were dealt in Sanskrit language.

Sanskrit was the medium of teaching learning process up to a period then it gradually declined and lost all its influence by the end of colonial rule. The colonial influence was so deep rooted that it retained its influence even after independence. Another case that lead to the replacement of Sanskrit was the development of regional languages. The direct conflict between Sanskrit and regional languages have been started somewhat from the 11th century, the time when the regional languages began to produce massive literary outputs and these languages were intimately associated with the identity of its speakers. And these languages by the time started to produce compendiums, translations and adaptations of original Sanskrit works and guides that exceeded their originals in Sanskrit.

Sanskrit was not the only undisputed language used for scholarly purposes. It co-existed with pāli and prākritis. The social reformers of ancient India who challenged the Vedas, Vedic rituals and priests resorted to languages other than Sanskrit- pāli and prākrit. But the changing political and social situations brought back the supremacy of Sanskrit as the language of scholars and scholarship. Both Jains and Buddhists accepted Sanskrit and produced works in Sanskrit well before 6th century AD.

Sanskrit is a language that least affected by crucial changes that may affect its structure and content in its course of time. The cause may be the grammar developed by Panini, Katyayana and Patanjali. A grammar cannot stop a language from undergoing change. Perhaps, it may be the mindset of the Indians to view Sanskrit as 'devavani' has caused this. This unchanging nature may be the cause of disputing the status of a spoken language to Sanskrit¹. All these show that Sanskrit was in constant contest with other popular languages that were in use and it won the contest for supremacy to an extent due to social or political reasons until the emergence of regional languages. Thereafter the popular religion turned to regional languages with different translations of itihisas and puranas. It was claimed that the teachings of Vedas were retold in itihisas and puranas².

The turbulent political conditions of medieval India brought further setback to Sanskrit as the Muslim dynasties rarely provided support to Sanskrit as the official language was Persian in Muslim ruled areas. As a result of fusion of Persian and North Indian dialects a new language Urdu was born. Yet, the scholastic activity was going on in Sanskrit medium, as the period from 6th C AD to 17th C AD produced some of the best works in various branches of knowledge like philosophy, mathematics etc. A total inactivity or reluctance to adopt Sanskrit for higher studies is certainly absent until the establishment of British rule. The British rule has put an end to the practice of using Sanskrit as medium for higher studies as well as the superiority that it enjoyed for about two millennia.

Generally, the history of Sanskrit itself is considered as the history of the knowledge systems in Sanskrit. Therefor the ebbs and flows in the course of Sanskrit are applied to all systems of thought and practices that

developed through Sanskrit. The contributions from regional languages were never treated as worthy and many doubted their ability to convey such ideas that has been conveyed in Sanskrit. Further they were considered as amateur translations of original Sanskrit texts.

Sanskrit and Ayurveda

The source books of Ayurveda were in Sanskrit and it was taught in the traditional way³. As said above, the history of Sanskrit language reflects many shades of social and political interferences and their outcomes, these are also applicable to Ayurveda too as it is also a system generally maintained in Sanskrit language. The system of Ayurveda never faced a challenge before the advent of 'Yunani' system of medicine with the Muslim rule. As far as the historical evidences are concerned they suggest the mutual coexistence of both the systems complementing each other⁴ though Ayurveda had to compromise on patronage.

With the British rule things changed⁵. They treated Ayurveda, Yunani and other indigenous systems of medicine, if there was any, practiced in India as primitive and unscientific. The pathasalas and madrasas that taught Ayurveda and Yunani in their syllabus had to drop them. The cultural new wave that was forming in India looked for a revival of Indian culture both in spiritual, social as well as in indigenous science and technology. First they looked for matching ideas in the tradition that to compare with the west and where it was available they adopted it. Wherever necessary they adjusted it with the western concepts. As the orientalist compared the knowledge base of indigenous medical system with that of western system, they soon realized the lack of updating in indigenous knowledge base. This forced the reformers of Ayurveda for the adaption of western methodology in the learning and practice of Ayurveda and associating it with western biomedicine to make it scientific in all respect, though in amid controversy⁷.

Simultaneously there were discussions regarding the medium of teaching of Ayurveda. At first the options were Sanskrit and Hindi and the sympathizers argued for their favorite language⁶. I have already pointed out that the works in regional languages were never accepted as useful or as valid compared to the classics of the system, which resulted in the negation of newly created knowledge depicted in the works in regional

languages which according to some studies amounts to hundreds. Ultimately and unfortunately this attitude towards literature in regional languages lead to a pathetic situation that a majority of practitioners of Ayurveda neither having the knowledge of classics in Sanskrit, for some or other reasons, or the knowledge created in the works in regional languages, as they learned the medicine through apprenticeship⁸.

This situation gradually resulted in the marginalization of Sanskrit in the study of Ayurveda⁹. Today Ayurveda become modernized and globalized but without Sanskrit. The contribution of Sanskrit to the development of Ayurveda and its methods of analysis, preservation and transmission was commendable until the dawn of its revival attempts by nationalists. The modern global Ayurveda is least depended on Sanskrit. It is still a topic of controversy whether to divorce or not from the bondage of Sanskrit.

Sanskrit as a knowledge system today

Few centuries back Sanskrit was a language in which knowledge were embedded. But today, Sanskrit became a knowledge system disseminating diametrically opposite conclusions. Medium is message. Ayurveda and other systems of knowledge are involved in this dialogue. The downward movement of a system from efficiency to inefficiency is to be studied and analyzed. Was language a cause or the social system or something else? Today Sanskrit is considered and treated in this background. Indigenous medicine also treated as a victim of colonial hegemony and its revival is held as a resistance against colonial hegemony. Hence the revival of Ayurveda even without Sanskrit is equal to the national freedom movement.

Contemporary Sanskrit studies political dimensions for various reasons¹⁰. It is discussed among academics and beyond. The language and its study were perceived from the mainstream and subaltern¹¹ points of view. Some discussions place Ayurveda to the set of main stream components of Indian culture and society as it was availed and practiced by a class which has all privileges since there were other systems that were followed by the underprivileged.

Notes and References

1. There is a view that Sanskrit is a dead language. Wolfgang Dressler said about language death as -"Language death occurs in unstable bilingual or multilingual speech communities as a result of language shift from a regressive minority language to a dominant majority language." ("Language Death." 1988). Losing influence does not mean the actual death of a language. "Linguists distinguish between language "death" and the process where a language becomes a "dead language" through normal language change, a linguistic phenomenon analogous to pseudoextinction. This happens when a language in the course of its normal development gradually morphs into something that is then recognized as a separate, different language, leaving the old form with no native speakers. The process of language change may also involve the splitting up of a language into a family of several daughter languages, leaving the common parent language "dead". This has happened to Latin, which (through Vulgar Latin) eventually developed into the Romance languages, and to Prakrit, which developed into the New Indo-Aryan languages. Such a process is normally not described as "language death", because it involves an unbroken chain of normal transmission of the language from one generation to the next, with only minute changes at every single point in the chain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_death

2. इतिहासपुराणाभ्यां वेदं समुपबृंहयेत्

3. Simple because out of all this medical pluralism, only one set of medical ideas and practices clearly emerged as a unified body of doctrine, embodied in learned treatises written in the Sanskrit language, and adopted as the basic curriculum for the organized teaching of medicine in scholarly families and schools. This system was called iiyurveda, and by the time Fa Hsien reached Pa!aliputra, it was already almost a thousand years old. For the system of ayurveda probably arose in a recognizable form at about the time of the B,uddha, and began to b~ codified in a series of treatises from that time onwards. Dominic Wujastyk, The roots of Ayurveda, Penguin Books, 1998, p.2

4. At the time of the British conquest the medical needs of the Indian population were being met by a variety of indigenous practices—Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha and folk medicine. Fruitful interaction between these systems, particularly between Ayurveda and Unani, led to the enrichment of their pharmacopocia and the improvement of diagnostic skills. K.N Panikkar, Culture. Ideology, Hegemony- Intellectuals and social consciousness in colonial India, Anthem Press, London, p.145-146

5. western medicine was introduced in india for the benefit of westerners living in india. During 19th century government setup regulatory and administrative mechanism to regularise medical practice in india and it provided all support to the western medicine established training centers and hospitals for western medicine. It became the officially supported system of medicine. The Bombay Medical Registration Act of 1912 provided room for registration of medical practitioners and constitution of a medical council. The registration was open only to 'Doctor, Bachelor and Licentiate of Medicine, and Master, Bachelor and Licentiate of Surgery of the Universities of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Allahabad and Lahore and holders of a diploma or certificate from a government medical college or school. The Act did not debar the practice of indigenous medicine, but it did not have the approval of the state and state assistance. But there were attempts to synthesize the

best elements and practices in both systems. In 1822 the government started a school for native doctors in Calcutta with a course of study combining indigenous and European medicine. Similar schools were also proposed in Bombay and Madras. Anatomy and modern medicine were introduced in the curricula of Calcutta Madrasa and Sanskrit College. The idea of a possible synthesis inherent in these experiments was given up after 1835 in favour of western knowledge. Consequently, the schools for native doctors were abolished, medical science was dropped at Sanskrit College and the Madrasa, and medical institutions with curricula exclusively devoted to western science were set up. Vide. K.N Panikkar, pp 148-151

6..... One of the aims in 1905 was 'to advance and diffuse scientific and technical knowledge through the medium of Sanskrit and Indian vernacular.' There were two groups over the issue of medium of instruction. One group supported the usage of Sanskrit and Indian vernaculars but others wanted integration of western science and also English as a medium of instruction along with Sanskrit and other vernaculars for giving instructions. Madhuri Sharma, *Indigenous and Western Medicine in Colonial India*, Foundation Books, 2012, p.27.

7."Modern Ayurveda" is here understood to be geographically set in the Indian subcontinent and to commence with the processes of professionalization and institutionalization brought about in India by what has been called the nineteenth-century revivalism of Ayurveda (Leslie 1998; Brass 1972; Jeffery 1988). Modern Ayurveda is characterized by a tendency toward the secularization of ayurvedic knowledge and its adaptation to biomedicine, and at the same time by attempts to formulate a unitary theory based on doctrines found in the classical ayurvedic texts. Frederick M. Smith and Dagmar Wujastyk, 'Introduction', *Modern and Global Ayurveda*, Eds. Dagmar Wujastyk and Frederick M. Smith, SUNY press, New York, 2008, p.2

8.The causes of decline of Ayurveda are many. Dr K N Panikkar observes that "The internal causes rested on three factors: stagnation of knowledge, ignorance of the practitioners, and non-availability of quality medicine. The main drawback of the systems was that their knowledge had become dated. However good the classical texts were, the knowledge contained in them had remained stagnant, as there were no substantial efforts to improve upon them through experimentation and by relating knowledge to new experience. Even this knowledge contemporary practitioners did not imbibe sufficiently. The classical texts were either not easily available or if available, most practitioners did not have the necessary language skills to assimilate their contents. The more easily accessible texts and commentaries in the vernacular languages were also not adequately made use of. In preference to the arduous task of mastering these texts and thus the fundamentals of the discipline, most practitioners adopted the easier method of oral instruction during short spells of apprenticeship under senior physicians. As a result, by the end of the nineteenth century an overwhelming majority of indigenous practitioners were ignorant of their art, purveying borrowed prescriptions to unsuspecting patients. Their only aim and interest was to earn a livelihood."

9."Global Ayurveda," on the other hand, refers to ayurvedic knowledge that has been transmitted to geographically widespread areas outside of India. In line with the ideologies of modern Ayurveda, interest groups concerned with ayurvedic pharmacopoeia

stress the “scientific” bases of Ayurveda and promote a secularized discipline stripped of its religious and spiritual connotations.paradoxically, despite its emphasis on spirituality, New Age Ayurveda has given rise to a new commercialized form of Ayurveda, emphasizing wellness and beauty as fundamental components of good health.

10. Sheldon Pollock’s approach toward Sanskrit is example to this. See the excerpt from his article the death of Sanskrit. “Few things are as central to this revisionism as Sanskrit, the dominant culture language of precolonial southern Asia outside the Persianate order. Hindutva propagandists have sought to show, for example, that Sanskrit was indigenous to India, and they purport to decipher Indus Valley seals to prove its presence two millennia before it actually came into existence. In a farcical repetition of Romantic myths of primevality, Sanskrit is considered—according to the characteristic hyperbole of the VHP—the source and sole preserver of world culture. The state’s anxiety both about Sanskrit’s role in shaping the historical identity of the Hindu nation and about its contemporary vitality has manifested itself in substantial new funding for Sanskrit education, and in the declaration of 1999–2000 as the “Year of Sanskrit,” with plans for conversation camps, debate and essay competitions, drama festivals, and the like. Pollock, S. (2001) ‘The Death of Sanskrit’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43(2), pp. 392–426. This Article is available at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/papers/death_of_sanskrit.pdf. This view was met by scholars like Rajiv Malhotra. In his *The battle for Sanskrit* Malhotra contends that the project of Pollock was politically motivated. Vide. Chapter one – ‘the hijacking of sanskrit and sanskriti’. Rajiv Malhotra, *The battle for Sanskrit*, Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, India, 2016. J. Hanneder criticizes the pollocks view as over interpretation- “ But it is my impression that Pollock has overinterpreted the evidence to support his theory, perhaps in his understandable anger overcurrent nationalistic statements about Sanskrit and indeed new attempts at resanskritization (p. 393) – processes that should perhaps be analyzed a few decades later from a distance. His commitment to this pronounced position seems to have forced him to defend the notion of death even in adverse circumstances and it is in these instances that his article remains unconvincing. (The article ‘on the death of Sanskrit is available at <http://dlx.booksc.org/11000000/libgen.scimag11069000-11069999.zip /browse/10.1023/a%253A1021366131934.pdf>

11. The terms subaltern and Subaltern Studies entered postcolonial studies through the works of the Subaltern Studies Group, a collection of South Asian historians who explored the political-actor role of the men and women who constitute the mass population, rather than the political roles of the social and economic elites, in the history of South Asia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subaltern_\(postcolonialism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subaltern_(postcolonialism)). “Seen from within the colonial world of India, ayurveda has been located as a part of ‘subaltern’ science in relation to ‘Western’ science. This is perhaps essentially true for the period after the 1820s, when the earlier openness towards ayurveda was replaced by an antiquarian interest on the one hand and a search for cheap and effective herbal simples on the other, without much regard for its theoretical principles”. Biswamoy Pati and Mark Harrison “Social history of health and medicine: Colonial India” in ‘The Social History of Health and Medicine in Colonial India’ 1-14; Routledge, New York, 2009 P.9