

# Spoken Sanskrit: It's past and present

Sanskrit is a member of the Indo-European Language family. It belongs to the Indo-Iranian sub family and is most closely related to the Iranian languages Old Persian and Avestan. Within this is the Indo-Aryan sub family in which Sanskrit is the oldest language. Very few languages have had as remarkable a fortune as Sanskrit. It is remarkable for three reasons. For its longevity, its stability during the course of its long history and for it has been elevated to the level of a sacred and/or divine language. These three features of Sanskrit make it an extraordinary language. It is also called *devabhāṣā*, the divine language or the language of gods. As the name suggests, Sanskrit is a cultivated, accurately formed, grammatically perfected or elaborated or refined or highly polished, and cultured language (*saṃskṛtā vāk* or *saṃskṛtā bhāṣā/ saṃskṛtabhāṣā* as it is commonly known) and by definition has always been a sacred and sophisticated language, used for religious and learned discourses.

Although Sanskrit is often regarded as a dead language, it is in fact an important living language for it is still spoken. It is a language of a great vitality even today. It is not the language of past but the language of present and future. The number of its speakers and users may be less, but certainly growing day by day. It is used as a medium of education, ritual, worship, prayer, and a language of social interaction. It was and still now is being used for the composition of a variety of literature secular as well as religious including dramas, novels, short stories and poetries. It is still strongly encouraged in Indian education which can be seen from the large number of students coming in the traditional colleges as well as universities for Sanskrit studies without any discrimination of gender, cast or creed. Moreover, since some years Sanskrit has been interesting for computer scientists who find its importance for the computer use. Therefore, it cannot be termed as *mṛtabhāṣā* (dead language) rather *amṛtabhāṣā* (eternal language).

Every language has two forms/styles, literary and spoken. Now a days we all are well acquainted with the literary form of Sanskrit, for it is taught and learnt in the colleges and universities all over the world. In the course of time the spoken form of Sanskrit has been forgotten due to different reasons. But it does not deny the existence of spoken Sanskrit. As far as spoken Sanskrit is concerned, there are enough evidences available in some of the inscriptions, in Sanskrit plays, and in the different varieties of Sanskrit literature, starting from Panini's time until 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century to remind us that it was a spoken language, a language used for diplomacy and as a vehicle of scientific and technical knowledge in ancient India. There is every reason to suppose that it was used by pandits (traditional scholars of Sanskrit) for the needs of their everyday communication among themselves as well as in their circle. There are also some indications of the use of Sanskrit in a wider circle, in princely courts, in certain cultivated environments and in the high society. There are indications that Sanskrit was the language of travelers and to some extent accessible even to people as a whole. Seeing the large varieties of texts written almost for every walk of life in Sanskrit, it is hard to believe that it was not spoken at any time. So there must not be any doubt that Sanskrit has really been a spoken language.

Keeping all the information available in the vast literature of Sanskrit in mind this paper aims at discussing on the spoken aspect of Sanskrit language in details in the past on the basis of available references and unfolding more and more about it such as who were the speakers/users of Sanskrit? How did they use it? Where did they use it, and so on? It will also discuss the present status of spoken Sanskrit not only in India but also the teaching of spoken Sanskrit in the universities out side India and what interests the scholars to learn it. And at last it will also throw some light on the emerging modern Sanskrit literature which is influenced by spoken Sanskrit.

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