

[Language: India Hosts 15th World Sanskrit Conference](#)

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Language

India Hosts 15th World Sanskrit Conference The Prime Minister opens gathering of 1,200 renowned linguistic scholars

By Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

"Sanskrit is the soul of India," proclaimed India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in chaste Hindi as he opened the 15th World Sanskrit Conference: "Sanskrit bharaat ki atma hai." His words were greeted with a standing ovation and five full minutes of sustained applause from the audience of Sanskrit lovers and scholars--one thousand from India and over two hundred from the rest of the world--packed to capacity in Delhi's prestigious Vigyan Bhavan. The by-invitation-only conference (previously held in many great cities of the world, including Paris, Leiden, Vienna, Edinburgh and Helsinki) ran from January 5 through 10, 2012.

The prime minister's inspiring endorsement made headlines throughout India and was quoted throughout the week by the eminent participants, who lived and breathed Sanskrit nearly around the clock at the two venues of the week-long gathering, Vigyan Bhavan and Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts. As it turned out, Hinduism Today was one of the few publications staying to cover the event after the PM's address--a revealing statement on the priorities of the Indian media, who might have taken greater interest in this prodigious international event in the nation's capital.

In a journalistic career spanning over two decades, this reporter has attended many big conferences, national and international. This one was a mega-event, both in scale and in intensity of participation at every turn. The conclave was sweetly enhanced by the posh venue--Vigyan Bhavan, which is used mostly for official government affairs--and by the enthusiastic presence of our prime minister. Also rare was the bipartisan support of a function with such a strong religious flavor. Though sponsored by the Congress-led government, it was equally endorsed by the

Bhartiya Janata opposition party.

Sanskrit was the preferred language of discourse; even the international delegates were conversing in fluent Sanskrit during the deliberations and discussions in hundreds of meetings. There were twenty wide-ranging session topics: Vedas; linguistics; epics and Puranas; Tantras and Agamas; grammar; poetry, drama and aesthetics; Sanskrit and Asian languages and literatures; Sanskrit and science; Buddhist studies; Jain studies; philosophies; religion; ritual; epigraph; Sanskrit in the technological world; modern Sanskrit literature; pandit meeting (conducted entirely in Sanskrit); poets' meeting; law and society; and manuscriptology. The sessions went on from morning to night in the various plush, high-tech halls and seminar rooms of Vigyan Bhavan, which spreads over several acres in the heart of Delhi. Delegates could be seen popping in and out of sessions, to catch at least parts of others going on simultaneously.

The first day's special lectures were held in the Bhavan's main hall, with Kapila Vatsyayan as chair. Ashok Aklujkar entitled his message "Reflections of an East-West Sanskritist," while scholar Lokesh Chandra addressed "Sanskrit as trans-creative dimensions in various languages, literatures and thought systems." Dr. Chandra observed, "Sanskrit has been the fountainhead of thought and belle letters, of visual and performing arts, of life and ritual, of power and virtue in Central, East and Southeast Asia. Modern life is threatened by unnatural developments. Humankind will have to find its rhymes in the deeper universes of being. Sanskrit enshrines samskaras, or values, that can illumine the tonality of the future--beyond cloning, computers and other manifestations of the technosphere."

The technical and in-depth topics, such as manuscriptology, Tantras and Agamas, were of great interest to attendees, who jumped at the chance to question the speakers. Other sessions were of wider interest. The poetry session, for instance--conducted entirely in Sanskrit--featured current topics, including a clever satire on mobile phones invoking their "omnipresence." Here the language of the Vedas was used for some healthy fun and entertainment!

The session Epics and Puranas attracted a large audience. Of special interest was Mrs. Sushma Jatoo's presentation: "Sacred geography of Amarnath: textuality and history," in which she shared her arduous pilgrimage to Amarnath, while highlighting its geographical and historical background.

A few topics I expected to hear about (but may have missed in the vast event) are: Sanskrit websites, Apple's open-source Devanagari font, the long-stalled Pune Sanskrit dictionary project and the remarkable experimental Indian villages where Sanskrit is the only language spoken.

Evenings featured the Festival of Sanskrit Theatre on the spacious lawn of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. Accomplished artists and troupes from all over India regaled, entertained and enthralled the assembled Sanskrit afficiandos with Sanskrit music, dance and drama. This reporter had never witnessed so much cultural activity completely in Sanskrit medium, which included Kuivaam, Kathakali, Nagivar Kuttu, Ankiya Nat and Manipuri Rasa. The performances were shown on big digital screens across the venue so even those at the back could enjoy the color, flavor and festivity.

In addition to the theater festival, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, National Manuscript Mission and other institutions collaborated in a series of exhibitions entitled "Visvavara," with the general theme, "Biocultural survival of humanity through Sanskrit traditions."

Another big draw was a huge Sanskrit book fair at which new books on Vedic and Sanskrit literature were released, and publishers of Sanskrit and Indology set up 70 stalls offering their recent publications for sale. The stalls did a roaring business in the evenings.

At the closing session, on January 10, guest of Honor Dr. Karan Singh, Member of Parliament and Chairperson of Indian Council for Cultural Relations, received a thundering applause for his opening statement: "I have heard people say that Sanskrit is a dead language. But my own view is that we are alive today because of Sanskrit language." Dr. Singh expressed his serious concern for the neglect of Sanskrit in many universities due to lack of financial resources and interest.

Presiding over this last event, Mrs. Sheila Dikshit, the Honourable Chief Minister of Delhi stated boldly that the time has come to free the Sanskrit language from universities, classrooms and academics and release it to the common people

through events such as conferences, evening dramas and music festivals.

The conference was jointly organized by Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan and the International Association of Sanskrit Studies. The Sansthan, fully funded by the government under the Human Resource Ministry, is a "deemed" (i.e., autonomous) university founded in 1970 to propagate, develop and encourage Sanskrit learning and research.

The conference was backed by India's Central Government and Delhi's administration--both led by the Congress Party. A solitary BJP (opposition party) member I spotted at the conference was totally supportive: "When it comes to the promotion of Sanskrit, we are very much with the government and organizers and congratulate them for convening this World Sanskrit Conference in such a professional manner."

From the Prime Minister: Dr. Manmohan Singh's Opening Address

I compliment the ministry of human resource development and the International Association of Sanskrit Studies (IASS) for organizing this truly unique event. I also extend my very warm greetings to all the scholars who are participating in this conference and have come to Delhi from far corners of the world.

Since its inception in 1972, the IASS has been organizing the World Sanskrit Conference every three years, with three previous conferences in India. I learned that the IASS is not concerned with Sanskrit in the narrow sense but more broadly, with research work based on solid knowledge of one or more Indian languages and on fundamental textual sources from South and South-East Asia. This is indeed a most worthy cause.

Sanskrit, which is recognized as one of the oldest living languages of the world, is often misunderstood as only a language of religious hymns and rituals. Such an understanding does injustice to the great genius of this language and betrays ignorance of the work of great writers, thinkers, sages and scientists like Kautilya, Charaka, Sushruta, Aryabhata, Varahamihira, Brahmagupta, Bhaskaracharya and many others. Indeed, Sanskrit is much more than a language. It is a complete

knowledge system that embodies the great learning traditions of ancient India. Jawaharlal Nehru, once described Sanskrit language and literature as "the greatest treasure that India possesses." He went on to say, "This is a magnificent inheritance; so long as this endures and influences the life of our people, so long will the basic genius of India continue to flourish."

Sanskrit has not only some of the greatest classics of world literature, but also a treasure of knowledge in mathematics, medicine, botany, chemistry, arts and humanities. If we provide the missing links and establish the required inter-disciplinary approaches, the wisdom of Sanskrit has the potential of enriching the present-day knowledge systems and Indian languages immensely.

The Sanskrit language has also been the source of values and ideals that have sustained India through the ages. Like the great civilization of India, Sanskrit does not belong to any particular race, sect or religion. It represents a culture that is not narrow and sectarian but open, tolerant and all-embracing. The open-minded seers and thinkers who spelt out their vision and philosophy in the sacred Vedas and the Upanishads were able to balance the opposites in their life and in philosophy. It is this spirit of liberalism and tolerance imbedded in Sanskrit that we must inculcate in our present-day life. The message of the ancient sages of India, who gave us the concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, the world as one family, continues to be of great significance to the world even today.

The Government of India is committed to the promotion and development of Sanskrit. Three institutions established by the government--Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth and Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth--are actively engaged in this task. It is also taking other measures to encourage the study of Sanskrit. These include financial assistance to modern schools offering Sanskrit as a subject and traditional Sanskrit schools offering modern subjects, and to voluntary organizations that are maintaining traditional Sanskrit institutions. In addition, Sanskrit departments of the universities are funded by the University Grants Commission. Financial assistance is also provided for the production of Sanskrit literature, including newspapers and journals, and reprinting of rare books. Scholars who have excelled in the study of Sanskrit are honored every year. In the course of time, we will further strengthen our efforts for the promotion, development and enrichment of Sanskrit.

Many of the modern Indian languages depend upon Sanskrit for their vocabulary.

The Commission for Technical and Scientific Terms established by the Government of India has also depended on Sanskrit sources for developing the technical terms in science and technology for Indian languages. I expect that this Conference will also contribute to better translation software and other computer programs in Indian languages.

Insights about the Conference

Prof. Radhavallabh Tripathi, Vice Chancellor, Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan: "In the past, we had seen that the Indians who attend international conferences sometimes get overawed and unable to participate freely in a dialogue. There is a wall of languages and factors connected to cultures and civilizations. Because of their lifestyles and eating habits, a certain distance is maintained. But here, in this conference, the Sanskrit scholars of the whole world got a chance to intermingle with the Sanskrit scholars of India in a very friendly atmosphere. This in itself could be termed an achievement. A lot of possibilities in Sanskrit have been identified, such as computerization to make it available to the world. Another achievement of the conference is that we could identify some of the upcoming scholars at the global level with great potential to contribute to the development of Sanskrit--some just 25 years old."

Prof. Ram Nath Jha, Jawahar Lal Nehru University, Delhi: "The most surprising and inspiring thing is that someone young based in a city located in some corner of Europe and America is working on a Sanskrit text about which many Indians do not even know. Hundreds of such young people, all over the world, are today engaged in the research work connected to Sanskrit. In one of the latest areas of research, "Navya Nyaya," or "New Logic," the most work is being done in Japan. New Logic is a very technical subject which developed between the tenth and eighteenth centuries."

Dr. Dominic Goodall, French School of the Far East, Paris: "The sessions on epigraphy, the study of ancient inscriptions, were very important. It made people realize that Sanskrit was the language of a very large part of the world in the earlier centuries--Indonesia, Cambodia, South Vietnam and so forth. People change their world view a bit when they see that the world of Sanskrit is huge."

Dr. Rajendra Nanavati, Former Director, Oriental Research Institute, Baroda: "I realized that a lot of work on Indian scriptures is now being done in other countries."

At times the feeling is that the scholars abroad are doing a more painstaking job than the scholars in India are doing. The interaction between our Indian scholars and the international scholars is beneficial for both."

Pankaja Ghai Kaushik, Assistant Professor of Sanskrit, Lady Sriram College, Delhi: "We cannot say that Sanskrit is an ancient language and if medicine and law were written in it, they are now outdated. At one point of time all knowledge was there only in Sanskrit language. Sanskrit offers lot of scope in terms of employment. I have not come across a single student of Sanskrit who could not find a job."

Dr. Shashi Prabha Kumar, Jawahar Lal Nehru University, New Delhi: "Sanskrit is not just a language. Sanskrit is a resource. It is a medium in which so many areas of knowledge texts are stored. In this conference itself there are more than 20 sections which include grammar, language, literature, technology, philosophy, history, poetry and what not. So we should not restrict ourselves to the notion of a language. Sanskrit is different than all other languages in that it is multidisciplinary in its own existence. So many texts in different areas and time periods are available in Sanskrit, and until today hundreds of thousands of manuscripts are lying unexplored."

Dr. Chirapat Prapandvidya, Silpakorn University, Thailand: "This is one of the best conferences I have ever seen. It has provided a chance to meet with the Sanskrit scholars from all over the world and made available to us whatever they have been doing in the field of Sanskrit. The next conference is scheduled in Thailand in 2015 and we will focus more on South Asia. The message I am taking from this conference is that the study of Sanskrit will make the world peaceful, as all the teachings give the message of nonviolence."

Prof. Mrs. Shashibala, IGNC: "Very few people know that in the ancient times people travelling from India to other countries were familiar with the Sanskrit language. In many kingdoms of central Asia, Sanskrit was the language of administration. I have displayed here how some of the legal and administrative documents were written in Sanskrit in the 3rd century. In Cambodia, Sanskrit was the language of administration till the 14th century. Most of us do not know about the kind of prestige and place Sanskrit enjoyed during the olden times. In China there was a king who donated jewelry to a temple and recorded this transaction in Sanskrit language."

Prof. Shashi Tewari, Maitreyi College, Delhi University: "Society needs to change its attitude toward the scholars of Sanskrit. They should be treated with more respect. The Sanskrit scholar should get as much respect as the scholars of other subjects are given by the society. After all, Sanskrit has a large number of branches and infinite knowledge. Even this conference is dealing with twenty branches of Sanskrit. The way the society treats the gurus of other subjects, the same treatment should be given to a Sanskrit guru as well. There is a small section of the society which labels Sanskrit scholars as priests and does not give them due respect."

Prof. Raja Ram Shukla, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi: "Ten years back, youth were not coming to Sanskrit. Their priorities were changing. They wanted to become engineers and doctors. Sanskrit was not being patronized during that period. But now we see the youth is getting attracted towards Sanskrit in a big way. Some follow the pure tradition of the gurukulas, which are stronger than in the recent past and number about 50. Others learn Sanskrit in the course of a modern education. A significant change is that gaining employment is not a big issue anymore for students of Sanskrit. One area with a lot of opportunities is the sea of manuscripts which need to be edited and published. The media needs to highlight the good work being done in the field of Sanskrit. The people of the world want peace and happiness and that can be available to them through the knowledge base of Sanskrit. It will bring the whole humanity together."