Ātman Returns. (Re)introducing Sanskrit Into UK Schools

by Antonia Ruppel

At a time when the Classics offerings across the country are forced to dwindle, when many schools are unable to offer Greek or even Latin, one school has bucked the trend by offering a classical language new to the UK curriculum. Since their foundation 40 years ago, St James' Independent Schools have pioneered the teaching of Sanskrit in a Western environment. Sanskrit has been developed as an academic subject with resources that take complete beginners to IGCSE and beyond to AS and A level.

Sanskrit is an Indo-European language thus related to Greek and Latin (as well as to modern European languages like English – yet added millennia of separate language development have, of course, made our tongue much more remote from Sanskrit than Latin or Greek were). Its oldest surviving text, the *Rigveda*, an organically grown collection of over 1,000 hymns to the deities of the pre-Hindu pantheon, dates back to a period spanning the second and first millennia BC. The spoken language(s) changed, the hymns became increasingly difficult to understand, and, in order to counteract this problem, an impressive grammatical tradition was born. It culminated in the grammar of Pāṇini (~5th-3rd centuries BC), whose aphoristic rules were followed by Sanskrit writers for many centuries. It was not until around the 11th century AD that literature in the Indian vernaculars gained momentum; and even then composition in clear Classical Sanskrit continued.

Sanskrit is written in its own script, the so-called *devanāgarī* (sometimes *nāgarī* for short). The *devanāgarī* was developed especially for Sanskrit and is thus phonemic (partly even phonetic): the spelling of a word shows clearly how that word is pronounced.

At St James, we start by teaching pupils the *devanāgarī* script. For the author, whose background is in university instruction, the approach and enthusiasm of 11-year-olds to this task came as a very positive surprise: many treated the characters as a kind of secret code; and given that there is no similarity between the characters and the Latin alphabet, the possibilities for free-form mnemonics were endless: अ, the sign for *a*, was analysed as 'a three and a T linked by a small line'; the distinctive element of ग *ga* (the line at the top and the downward stroke on the right are shared by most characters) was described by some pupils as a golf club – which nicely serves to remind us that *g* in Sanskrit always is a hard sound, as in golf, and never a soft one, as in, for example, *gym.* For some dyslexic students, it appeared to be a good experience to be at the same level as their peers again, all struggling equally with the new signs. As far as I can tell, the phonemic nature of the writing also makes reading Sanskrit words easier for them (but I say this based on my experiences with three pupils, which obviously is not a statistically relevant sample yet). Because the *devanāgarī* is a syllabic script (apart from initial vowels, each sign represents a consonant and a vowel, as e.g. त *ta*, ग *ga*, प *pa*), learning its characters and learning whole Sanskrit words easily go hand in hand: just two characters are needed to be able to read and write words like नर- *nara-* 'man', शर- *śara-* 'arrow', रथ- *ratha-* 'chariot' and many others.

At St James, pupils start learning Sanskrit and Latin at the same time (in Year 7). Structural similarities between them mean that what has been encountered in one language can be reinforced with the other. Both have three genders – masculine, feminine, neuter – and in both, the most frequent type of feminine noun ends in *-a* in the nominative singular, and the neuter in *-m*. (The masculine nominative singular *-s* of Latin has changed to a different sound in Sanskrit, *-ḥ*.) Endings of other cases (such as the *-m* in the *-um/-am/-um* of the 1st- and 2nd-declension accusative singular) are paralleled in Sanskrit. The cases and their functions, too, show great overlap between the two languages: the idea of nominative 'subject' and accusative 'object' become easier to grasp when they are encountered more frequently; genitive and dative behave very similarly across the two languages; and the Latin ablative with its confusing array of meanings and uses is more easily understood once the Sanskrit situation has been encountered: here, each of the three cases that have merged into the Latin ablative have survived

The Journal of Classics Teaching 16 (32) p.40-42 © The Classical Association 2016. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631015000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unscathed. Understanding the Latin ablative as a combination of the instrumental, the locative and the ablative that they regularly see in Sanskrit helps pupils find the right translation when they encounter an ablative in a Latin text. These are of course only a small number of examples of how the two languages parallel each other; similarities in verb forms and usage, the idea of grammatical agreement, the appearance of gender and number in adjectives all are shared between Latin and Sanskrit. In turn, forms and phenomena encountered in Latin and its straightforwardly legible script may help pupils recognise forms newly encountered in Sanskrit.

In Years 7 and 8, we focus on teaching morphology, simple syntax, and vocabulary. By Year 10, pupils have been introduced to all relevant Sanskrit grammar, but it is from Year 9, when we begin using our GCSE materials, that the focus slowly shifts to more content-related matters. Pupils first read stories, written by us, that retell episodes from the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Then they slowly shift to the GCSE set texts: mostly, those are taken from ancient collections of Sanskrit fables (such as the *Hitopadeśa* or the *Pañcatantra*) that were used as Mirrors of Princes and have considerable overlap with, among others, the Western / Aesopian fable tradition. In addition, pupils read a small selection of verses from the *Bhagavadgītā* (literally 'Song of the Bountiful One' – *Gītā* for short), a conversation in which Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, answers the questions of the warrior Arjuna on, basically, the topic of how to live well and with the right priorities. As Arjuna's various questions can be seen as representing the perspectives of various kinds of people – the cerebral, the active, the pious – and Krishna answers all of them patiently, the *Gītā* holds a very wide-ranging appeal. This reading of original texts is complemented by a module that we refer to as 'Epic Civilisation', an introduction to key philosophical, historical, literary and societal concepts that pupils encounter in the set texts. In a way, this is parallel to Classical Civilisation courses; yet the civilisations and periods represented by Sanskrit literature are so wide-ranging and diverse that it was necessary to focus on one; and that one is the culture and civilisation represented in the Sanskrit epics, and in all later texts that are written in the same tradition.

The GCSE exam, which consists of two papers and is administered by CIE, includes seen translation and comprehension, unseen translation, simple translation into Sanskrit, questions on the *Epic Civilisation* module and a section on sandhi, a grammatical phenomenon important when reading Sanskrit texts. Having completed the GCSE curriculum, pupils have Sanskrit language competence, have read and reflected on a number of Sanskrit texts and have broad background knowledge of the key concepts recurring in and foundational to the texts they have read. This is of course designed to be the ideal basis for continuing on to AS and A Level (on which see more below); yet just the GCSE already leaves pupils with a number of important skills and qualifications. Sanskrit has similar desirable 'side-effects' as Latin or Greek – due to the clear morphology, many language phenomena that exist in English but are not formally distinct can be grasped more easily, increasing the pupils' ease with which they use their own language. Having encountered a cultural and intellectual tradition that is not at the basis of occidental culture broadens our views on what is human, and what is culture-specific. In Sanskrit philosophy, for example, there is a strong 'non-dualistic' tradition which holds that, underlyingly, all is one and the multiplicity of things we encounter in every-day life is an illusion. It is difficult to wrap one's mind around how this could be and why someone would come up with this idea; and so it is very interesting to then compare these *a-dvaita* ('non-dualistic') concepts with Zeno's paradoxes, designed to show that, while the monism represented by Zeno's teacher Parmenides may be γελοῖ[ον], pluralism is ἔτι γελοιότερ[ον] (Plato, Parmenides 128c-d) as it leads us into fast runners unable to catch up with tortoises, arrows being unable to move etc. This is just one small example of how one might use classical Indian and Western traditions of thought to illuminate each other. While such comparisons are not included in the syllabus, any Sanskrit teacher whose background is as a Classicist (such as the author of this article) will find plenty of others to help pupils engage with and understand the new cultural surroundings we put them into.

Independently from this, of course, learning Sanskrit and studying a slice of ancient Indian culture allows pupils of South Asian origin to learn more about the culture of their forebears. In India, the distant past is in many ways much more prevalent than it is in Europe, and knowledge of the origins of many still popular stories, names, theories and mind-sets, as well as of the language at the basis of all those spoken in northern India, allows for greater cultural competence. This is helpful not only when the ancient past is used (or perhaps abused?) by modern politicians.

Finally, (and I mention this as our goal as educators is not just to give our pupils a well-rounded education because that is good in itself, but also because this will hopefully make them more employable). Many of our past pupils have told us that in their first job interviews, when employers still look at things such as choice of GCSEs, it was the appearance of Sanskrit on their school records had caught the interviewer's attention, and they were asked about this unusual qualification. For once, Sanskrit being small and even more marginal than Classics comes as an advantage.

At AS and A Levels, the main focus lies on allowing pupils to read substantial amounts of original Sanskrit texts, and on reflecting on these in more depth and detail than they had been able to at GCSE. The set texts at AS Level are substantial excerpts from the *Bhagavadgītā*, more fables from the *Hitopadeśa*, and sections from the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic. At A Level, we read more from the *Bhagavadgītā* (and some ancient commentary on it), as well as excerpts from the *Manusmṛti,* the *Buddhacarita* and the *Upaniṣads.*

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, 'The travels of Rāma', while of course having much to offer in its own right, has parallels to the Homeric epics: similarly to the *Odyssey*, it tells of the travels of a man and of what it means to be 'a man'; and like the Iliad and *Odyssey*, the Sanskrit epics had a long oral tradition before they were first written down. Unlike the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, however, they exist in different versions in different parts of India. The *Manusmṛti*, 'The Lawcode of Manu', on the other hand, is a legal text that describes what a reign by the Scholarly / Brahmin and Warrior Castes should be like. It is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631015000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particularly fascinating for pupils with an interest in modern-day India – where many moral and societal notions particularly in more conservative circles can be traced straight back to this approximately 2,000-year-old text – as well as for anyone considering taking up Law at university. To show the variety of Sanskrit texts and balance the Hindu and Buddhist perspectives, we then read excerpts from the *Buddhacarita*, 'The Works of the Buddha'. Within this text, the oldest complete biography of the Buddha, the syllabus focuses on the passages describing Siddārtha Gautama's (the later Buddha's) first encounters with suffering, old age and death – the pivotal moments on which his later realisations and teachings are based. The oldest among the set texts, finally, are excerpts from three of the *Upaniṣads*, works discussing the philosophical / religious views represented in the Vedas, the oldest Sanskrit documents.

In addition to seen translation and comprehension, the AS exam includes unseen translation, translation into Sanskrit and two essay questions, while the A-Level exam adds unseen translation, unseen comprehension and Sanskrit composition, as well as a choice of higher-level composition and questions about the system used by Pāṇini, the above-mentioned ancient Indian grammarian. To prepare our pupils for all this, we use materials written by us (that is, past and present Sanskrit teachers at any of the St James Schools), some external works (such as W. H. Maurer's *The Sanskrit Language* for Sanskrit composition) as well as the past papers available on the International Sanskrit Examinations Resource (ISER) website, www.sanskritexams.org.uk. On the ISER website, we have put together all the resources needed for teaching Sanskrit in a secondary- (and even primary-) school environment. Most of our books (including all GCSE, AS and A Level books) can be downloaded as pdfs; all past papers for all public exams are available, together with the exam specifications and advice on exam preparation. There are links to online resources we have compiled on *brainscape* and *quizlet*, and there is a video course, following along our textbooks, for anyone studying Sanskrit without a teacher.

Having completed writing and putting together the materials needed for teaching Sanskrit in an English-language, secondary-school environment, and having the support of Cambridge International Examinations to administer all the public exams, we have been putting on information and training days for teachers, especially Classics teachers, who may be interested in learning Sanskrit and offering it at their schools, whether as a lunchtime or after-school activity or as a regular subject. If you would like to hear more about what we do, please simply contact the author at antonia.ruppel@gmail.com.

Knowledge of Sanskrit opens up a field of literature that includes epics, plays, poems, technical and literary prose. Some texts focus on eternal truths, others present us with thoughts that seem strikingly modern. In many ways, Sanskrit is to India (and the understanding of India) what Latin is to Europe. Like its Greek and Roman counterparts, Sanskrit literature changes our view of the present. In the UK, Sanskrit is close to disappearing even from scholarly life. But who knows? Maybe some day we will get to watch the blockbuster *Ātman Returns*.

Dr. Antonia Ruppel
cambridge.sanskrit@gmail.com

Antonia Ruppel (PhD Classics Cantab.) was the Townsend Lecturer in the Greek, Latin and Sanskrit Languages at Cornell University from 2005 to 2014. She now works as a teacher of Classics and Sanskrit at St James Senior Boys School. She is the author of the *Cambridge Introduction to Sanskrit* and can be contacted at cambridge.sanskrit@gmail.com.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631015000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press