

To London, to learn Sanskrit

In the heart of London, a British school has made Sanskrit a compulsory subject for its junior division because it helps students grasp maths, science and other languages better. And the children are fascinated

PHOTOS: ADITYA GHOSH/HT

Aditya Ghosh
London

THE MORNING sun fills the classroom, bouncing off the blackboard with its immaculately written, carefully spaced lines of Devnagiri script. The students, bent over their textbooks, are reading their copies of the *Ramayana*. From time to time, they address their questions, in Sanskrit, to the teacher. Doubts dissolved, they start reciting some shlokas from the book in perfect unison.

The classroom could be one of the last surviving *pathshalas* in the alleys of Varanasi. But it is far removed from the Indian subcontinent — by a few thousand miles, in fact. The school is located in one of London's central suburbs and most of the students, aged between five and 10, are Caucasian.

At St James Independent School at Earsby Street, near Kensington Olympia, Sanskrit is a compulsory subject. For the school believes that learning this ancient Indian language not only helps students pick up other European languages faster and grasp Math and Science better, but results in better all-round cognitive development of the child. And their documented research of 12 years has only convinced them further of the advantages of learning this great language.

In India, Sanskrit remains an esoteric and erudite subject, carefully confined to specialised institutes. But Warwick Jessup, a PhD from Oxford in the language and head of the Sanskrit department at St James, has integrated it in the everyday lives of the school's 800-odd students.

"And why not?" argues Jessup. "This is the most perfect and logical language in the world, the only one that is not named after the people who speak it. Indeed the word itself means 'perfected language'."

"It is also the mother of most Indo-European languages. And in the past 10 years, we've realised that it helps students in their overall cognitive development," adds Paul Moss, the headmaster of the school.

How's your Vedic maths?

Integrating Sanskrit in the syllabus wasn't easy, though. Available Indian textbooks were unable to stir the students' interest and Jessup decided to think differently. The result was a set of innovative textbooks designed to tell the rich stories of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and Lord Krishna; not to bog down young minds in volumes of vocabulary and the intricacies of grammar.

According to Moss, it changed the way both students and their parents responded to the experiment. Jessup also developed brochures explaining to parents why Sanskrit was important, outlining its connections with English and European languages like Latin and French.

"After a while parents also realised that their children were picking up everything faster," says Moss.

There are even more benefits, claims Moss. "The Devnagiri script and spoken Sanskrit are two of the best ways for a child to overcome stiffness of the fingers and the tongue," he explains. "Today's European lan-



OPEN MINDS: At an outdoor lesson



PHILOSOPHICAL CONFLUENCE: Students at St James Independent junior school, which, while rooted in the Christian ethos, draws on many Indian ideas. The school's meals are also fully vegetarian.

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guages do not use many parts of the tongue and mouth while speaking or many finger movements while writing, whereas Sanskrit helps immensely to develop cerebral dexterity through its phonetics." Even the school inspectors recently observed that the Devnagiri script aided the development of better motor skills in the students, he says.

Encouraged by the result of their Sanskrit programme, the school now teaches Vedic maths — and the results are showing. "The children have benefited greatly as it helps them improve their numeric and mental calculation skills fantastically," says Moss.

Even more interestingly, students are often taken outdoors to learn the language in an ambience reminiscent of that Rabindranath Tagore tried to introduce in Santiniketan. For the second half of the lesson, the students move to a small garden behind the school and there, in the soft winter sun, they recollect what they learnt in class and recite the story of Ram's *vanvas* and his 14-year journey in the forest. As they are reminded of the words they learnt in the classroom and the new form of grammar they encountered, British and Indian students



BENCHMARK: Students learn their Sanskrit pronunciation at the St James Independent junior school in central London.

alike share in the enthusiasm.

Which, according to Sushrut Jadhav, a psychiatrist and teacher, whose daughter Leela studies in the school, is a much better way to learn about linguistics and culture — without the baggage of religion and caste. "I was happy to see the way they were teaching the language from a holistic point of view, trying to connect the evolution of different languages and linguistic

links across the world," he says.

For Leela, though, the biggest attraction lies elsewhere. She has just embarked on a path that leads her to various connections between Sanskrit and English. And she is fascinated; she can tell you how the English 'donation' was actually a derivative of the Sanskrit 'da', which means 'to give'. Or that 'vahana' or vehicle was the mother of the English 'vehicle'. Or how

'stha', meaning stationary, morphed into 'stand' in English.

Leela is not alone; many of St James' students show enough interest in the language to continue with it in their senior school as well, some even opting to specialise in it at prestigious universities. "Our students have done well in Sanskrit departments at Oxford," Jessup claims proudly.

Across Europe, at the Jagiellonian

A MATTER OF FAITHS

The St James Independent schools were founded in 1975 by Leon MacIaren, who was trained as a barrister but was in essence a philosopher.

Education at the schools he established caters for the intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual needs of children, and the curriculum is wide-ranging, including science, mathematics, languages, music and fine art. And at its junior school, students must learn Sanskrit as a second language for six years. The school's meals are also fully vegetarian.

Although it draws on some Indian traditions, the school is also rooted in the Christian ethos. On its website, the school says "We support the Christian tradition of the nation, [but] we seek to discover and teach the unifying principles common to all the great faiths of the world."

MacIaren was much influenced by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (who passed away earlier this week) and his technique of Transcendental Meditation. He also drew upon the teachings of the Shantanand Saraswati, the 'Shankaracharya' of the North. As a result, many philosophy courses of the School began centering around Advaita Vedanta.

MacIaren also founded the School of Economic Science more than half a century ago. The school offers courses in philosophy and economics to adults.



The late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

Sumana Ramanan



'Sanskrit is the mother of most Indo-European languages. And in the past 10 years, we've realised that it helps students in their overall cognitive development'
PAUL MOSS, Headmaster
St James Independent school

University at Krakow, Poland, which has the oldest Indology department in east Europe, Marzenna Czerniak-Drodowicz, head of the Sanskrit department, echoes what most of us feel: "Indians have failed to preserve their Sanskrit heritage or come up with innovative teaching methods to keep it alive. This is true of many regional Indian languages as well. And St James school helps us realise how powerful a tool it can be if taught judiciously."

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An exquisitely refined language

Sumana Ramanan

Warwick Jessup has taught Sanskrit in St James Independent School for the past 20 years. He spoke to HT in a phone interview.

Q: Why has the school chosen Sanskrit as a compulsory subject for its junior division, instead of European classical languages such as Latin or Greek?

A: We do offer Latin and Greek in senior school, but Sanskrit in its most ancient form predates both these languages. It is also perhaps closest to the root language from which descended all Indo-European languages, including English and many languages that are spoken all the way from the Americas to Iceland to the Bay of Bengal.

In your school's brochure, 'Why Sanskrit?' explains that studying its grammar brings 'order to the mind and clarifies thinking.' Could you elaborate?

Sanskrit is the culmination of millennia of endeavour to refine speech and thought so that the human race can aspire to the

heights of civilisation and fathom the depths of philosophical profundity. It is the pinnacle of achievement of people of enormous intellect.

Philologist and Sanskritist Sir William Jones said in 1786, "The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either..."

A line of scholars consciously refined the language. Panini was at the end of this line. They stepped in and said, "We are going to perfect it." That's the main difference between Sanskrit and modern languages, and even other classical languages.

The school claims that there are many cognitive benefits to learning Sanskrit at a young age. What are they?

Take the alphabet — it is laid out in a very systematic fashion, reflecting the five possible mouth positions. The ancients obviously studied all the possible positions and laid out the alphabet accordingly. And these precise mouth positions accurately provide an

excellent training while children's vernacular power of speech is developing. Children love the sound of Sanskrit, and if given at an early age, assimilate it as part of their capital for life.

'Even students with learning disabilities get a lot out of learning Sanskrit because it is a perfectly phonetic language, unlike English'

Then comes the introduction to Sanskrit grammar, which orders the construction of words and sentences more systematically than perhaps any other. If presented simply and methodically in an enjoyable manner, it delights the mind of the young child, enhancing the child's expression in any language.

Your students are predominantly Caucasian. How do students from such a different cultural background take to learning Sanskrit?

By recognising a common Indo-European heritage, children from seemingly diverse backgrounds are united as they realise that the different modern languages that they speak are intimately related.

Take for example the Sanskrit root 'stha' — 'to stand'. From this root, apart from a plethora of Sanskrit words, we also derive the English words stage, stance, stanch, stanza, stay, constant, obstacle, stall, status, statute, institute, destitute, assist, consist and subsist, to name but a few!

Of perhaps even greater significance than all the above benefits is the opportunity to imbibe deeply the universal ideas that have been enunciated by great poets of antiquity.

How hard or easy do students find learning the language?

We have students of varying abilities. But even those with learning disabilities get a lot out of learning Sanskrit because it is such a perfectly phonetic language, unlike English. In English, the spelling of words is not a consistent guide to their pronunciation, but in Sanskrit, once they learn the sounds, they are able to read words easily, and that gives them a lot of confidence. It is one of our most popular subjects at the junior school level.

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PERFECT CHOICE: Dr Jessup is passionate about Sanskrit.