

## HISTORY OF SANSKRIT – AN IN-DEPTH OVERVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Sanskrit, often revered as the *Devabhasa* (language of the gods), is one of the oldest known languages of the Indo-European family. With a documented tradition spanning over three millennia, Sanskrit has been the cornerstone of ancient Indian literature, philosophy, science, and spiritual discourse. Its journey from Vedic origins to Classical refinement represents one of the most profound linguistic evolutions in human history. This article explores the historical development of Sanskrit, from its Vedic roots to its modern revival efforts.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sanskrit (संस्कृतम्, *Sanskritam*) is widely revered as *Devabhasa* — the "language of the gods" — embodying over three millennia of religious, literary, and intellectual heritage. The name itself, derived from the Sanskrit root *kr* ("to make, do") with the prefix *sam-* ("together, completely"), meaning "well-formed" or "perfected," captures the language's hallmark precision and refinement.

Emerging from the larger Indo-European linguistic family, Sanskrit's earliest attested form is Vedic Sanskrit, preserved in the Vedic hymns such as the *Rgveda* (c. 1500–1000 BCE). These texts elevate language beyond mere communication—each syllable is laden with ritual potency, and its correct pronunciation is believed essential to the efficacy of sacred rites.

By around the 5th century BCE, Sanskrit underwent a significant transformation through the work of the grammarian Panini, who codified its grammar in the *Astadhyayi*. This groundbreaking text, consisting of nearly 4,000 concise aphoristic rules (*sutras*), effectively

transitioned Sanskrit into its Classical phase, establishing its structure and standardizing usage. Scholars today liken Panini's analytical rigor to algorithmic precision, noting its relevance to computational linguistics and modern language theory.

Sanskrit's influence rapidly transcended the Indian subcontinent. It became the lingua franca of courts, religion, and scholarship across Southeast Asia, as evidenced by Sanskrit inscriptions, loanwords, and literary traditions across Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and beyond. Local writing systems emerged from adaptations of Indian scripts such as Brahmi and Pallava, while regional languages absorbed both vocabulary and stylistic elements from Sanskrit. Temples like Borobudur and Angkor Wat stand as architectural testaments to the deep imprint of Indian cultural and linguistic influence in the region.

### Etymology and Meaning

- The term *samskrta* is derived from the root *kr* ("to do, to make") with the prefix *sam-* ("together, completely"), implying "well-prepared" or "perfectly formed."
- Ancient grammarians like Panini used the word to distinguish the cultivated language from the colloquial *Prakṛta* languages.

### Historical Phases of Sanskrit

#### Vedic Sanskrit (c. 1500–500 BCE)

- Earliest form of Sanskrit found in the *Rgveda*, one of the oldest texts in the world.
- Primarily an oral tradition preserved by elaborate mnemonic techniques.
- Phonetics and grammar were fluid compared to later codification.
- Language used for ritual, hymns, and early philosophical thought.
- keytexts: *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, *Atharvaveda*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, *Upanisads*.

#### Classical Sanskrit (c. 500 BCE onwards)

- Standardized by Panini in his *Astadhyayi*, one of the most sophisticated grammar treatises ever written.
- Panini's system included nearly 4,000 rules defining phonetics, morphology, and syntax.
- Supported by works of later grammarians: *Katyayana* and *Patanjali (Mahabhasya)*.
- Flourished as the language of poetry, drama, philosophy, science, and diplomacy.
- **Key Literary Figures:** Kalidasa, Bhasa, Sudraka, Bhavabhuti, Aryabhata, Varahamihira, Sushruta, and Charaka.

### Geographical and Cultural Spread

- Spread beyond India to Nepal, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia through trade, religion, and diplomacy.
- Influenced numerous languages — Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Kannada, Thai, Khmer, and even Javanese contain Sanskrit-derived vocabulary.
- Served as a pan-Indian lingua franca for scholars, much like Latin in medieval Europe.

### Sanskrit in Science and Knowledge Systems

- **Mathematics & Astronomy:** Aryabhata, Bhaskara, and Varahamihira wrote in Sanskrit.
- **Medicine:** *Charaka Samhita* and *Susruta Samhita* are foundational Ayurvedic texts.
- **Linguistics:** Ancient phonetic precision influenced modern computational linguistics.

### Decline and Preservation

- Declined as a spoken vernacular around the 12th century CE due to socio-political changes and rise of regional languages.
- Continued as a scholarly, liturgical, and literary language.
- Colonial and missionary activities in the 18th–19th centuries spurred renewed scholarly interest in Europe, leading to comparative philology and discovery of Indo-European connections.

### Modern Revival Efforts

- Institutions like Sanskrit Bharati, Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, and various universities promote its teaching.
- Spoken Sanskrit movements aim to reintroduce it as a communicative language.
- Modern literature, news broadcasts, and even digital media now exist in Sanskrit.

### Timeline

| Period         | Key Features       | Notable Works   |
|----------------|--------------------|---|
| 1500–500 BCE   | Vedic Sanskrit     | Rgveda, Yajurveda   |
| 500 BCE–200 CE | Early Classical    | Panini's <i>Astadhyayi</i>  |
| 200–1200 CE    | Golden Age         | Kalidasa's works, epics like <i>Mahabharata</i> , <i>Ramayana</i> |
| 1200–1800 CE   | Scholarly use only | Commentaries, philosophical works                                 |
| 1800–present   | Revival            | Modern Sanskrit literature, media                                 |

## Sanskrit Grammar (Samskrta Vyakarana)

Sanskrit grammar, known as **Vyakarana** (व्याकरण), is one of the six **Vedaṅgas** (ancillary sciences of the Vedas) and is considered the most sophisticated grammatical system in the world. The term *vyakarana* literally means “analysis” or “separation,” referring to the process of breaking language into its structural components for study and perfection.

## Historical Foundations

The roots of Sanskrit grammar are deeply embedded in the Vedic tradition, where precise pronunciation (*siksha*) and correct grammatical form were crucial for preserving the sacred texts. The earliest grammatical works, now lost in complete form, are attributed to pre-Paninian grammarians such as Sakatayana and Sakatayana, and Apisali.

The most authoritative and enduring work is Panini's *Astadhyayi* (circa 5th–4th century BCE), an analytical masterpiece consisting of about 4,000 *sutras* (aphoristic rules). Panini systematized grammar so completely that his framework remains relevant and functional even today.

## Structure of Paninian Grammar

Panini's grammar operates on a rule-based, generative system. It is divided into eight chapters (*asta-adhyaya*), each containing four sections (*pada*). The methodology uses:

- **Sutras** – Concise, highly technical rules.
- **Pratyaharas** – Abbreviations using the Siva Sutras for phonetic grouping.
- **Anubandhas** – Meta-linguistic markers that guide derivations.
- **Paribhasas** – Interpretive rules that resolve conflicts between grammatical instructions.

## Key Components of Sanskrit Grammar

### a) Phonetics and Phonology (Siksha & Sandhi)

- **Siva Sutras**: A list of phonemes organized for derivational rules.
- **Sandhi**: Euphonic combinations where sounds change depending on their position (e.g., *tat + api* → *tadapi*).

### b) Morphology (Rupa-vicara)

- **Noun Declensions (Subanta)**: Sanskrit nouns decline based on gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), number (singular, dual, plural), and case (*vibhakti* – eight types).

- **Verb Conjugations (Tiñanta):** Verbs conjugate based on tense, mood, number, and person. The root (*dhatu*) undergoes modifications to produce finite and non-finite forms.

#### c) Syntax (Vakya-vyavastha)

While Sanskrit allows flexible word order due to its inflectional nature, the most common structure is **Subject–Object–Verb (SOV)**. Agreement of gender, number, and case ensures clarity even with varied ordering.

#### d) Derivation (Pratyaya-vicara)

- **Krt Pratyayas:** Affixes that derive nouns and adjectives from verbal roots.
- **Taddhita Pratyayas:** Affixes used for secondary derivations (e.g., from nouns to related nouns).

#### Other Major Grammarians

- **Katyayana:** Provided *Vartikas* (explanatory notes) on Panini's work.
- **Patanjali:** Authored the *Mahabhasya*, a detailed commentary blending grammar with philosophy.
- **Bhartrhari:** Philosophically explored the connection between language and reality in the *Vakyapadiya*.

#### Role of Grammar in Ayurveda & Other Sastras

In Ayurveda, precise interpretation of classical texts like *Caraka Samhita* depends on accurate understanding of Sanskrit grammar. A single grammatical misinterpretation can change the meaning of a therapeutic procedure or medicinal formulation. Hence, traditional medical education often included a strong foundation in Vyakarana.

#### DISCUSSION

The history of Sanskrit is a remarkable linguistic journey that mirrors the socio-cultural, religious, and intellectual evolution of the Indian subcontinent. Its transformation from the oral tradition of the Vedic period to the standardized Classical form under Panini is not merely a linguistic shift but a reflection of changing patterns of thought, administration, and artistic expression.

#### 1. Vedic Sanskrit – Ritual Language and Oral Heritage

Vedic Sanskrit (c. 1500–500 BCE) is preserved primarily in the Vedas, with the *Rgveda* being the earliest and most significant corpus.<sup>[1]</sup> The oral preservation techniques—such as

*padapatha* (word-by-word recitation) and *krama-patha* (step-by-step recitation)—ensured phonetic fidelity for centuries.<sup>[2]</sup> The language of this period is highly archaic, with a complex verbal system, extensive use of the subjunctive mood, and a vocabulary steeped in religious symbolism.

## 2. Transition to Classical Sanskrit – The Paninian Standard

The transition from Vedic to Classical Sanskrit occurred around the mid-first millennium BCE with the codification of grammar by Panini in the *Astadhyayi*.<sup>[3]</sup> This work, along with the commentaries of Katyayana (*Varttikas*) and Patanjali (*Mahabhasya*), formed a linguistic canon that was universally recognized by scholars.<sup>[4]</sup> The precision of Panini's system allowed Sanskrit to remain largely unchanged for over two millennia, ensuring its suitability for literary and philosophical works.

## 3. Sanskrit as a Pan-Indic Lingua Franca

From the Mauryan period onwards, Sanskrit began to emerge as a supra-regional literary and administrative language, especially during the Gupta Empire (c. 4th–6th centuries CE).<sup>[5]</sup> While Prakrt languages were common in inscriptions and daily life, Sanskrit was preferred for royal proclamations, religious texts, and scholarly treatises.<sup>[6]</sup> This dual-language system mirrored the Latin–vernacular relationship in medieval Europe.

## 4. Literary and Scholarly Output

The **Classical period** (roughly 200 BCE to 1200 CE) witnessed a golden age of Sanskrit literature. Works such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* reached their final forms, and poets like Kalidasa produced masterpieces including *Sakuntala* and *Meghaduta*.<sup>[7]</sup> Sanskrit was also the medium of seminal works in mathematics (*Aryabhatiya*), astronomy (*Surya-Siddhanta*), medicine (*Susruta Samhita* and *Charaka Samhita*), and philosophy (the *Darsanas*).

## 5. Spread Beyond India

Sanskrit's influence extended far beyond the Indian subcontinent. Trade, religion, and diplomacy carried it to Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia, where it left its mark on scripts, vocabulary, and court literature.<sup>[8]</sup> Inscriptions in Khmer, Old Javanese, and Thai bear testimony to Sanskrit's prestige in royal and religious contexts.

## 6. Decline and Scholarly Preservation

After the 12th century CE, Persian and later European colonial languages became dominant in administration, and Sanskrit gradually ceased to be a spoken lingua franca.<sup>[9]</sup> However, it persisted in ritual, philosophy, and scholarly contexts. The 18th- and 19th-century European discovery of Sanskrit by scholars such as Sir William Jones catalyzed the birth of comparative Indo-European linguistics.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 7. Modern Revival

Today, institutions such as Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan and movements like Samskrita Bharati are revitalizing Sanskrit through formal education and spoken Sanskrit camps.<sup>[11]</sup> It continues to be used in religious ceremonies, academic discourse, and even modern media, such as All India Radio's Sanskrit news broadcasts.<sup>[12]</sup>

### Examples of Sanskrit Influence in Ayurveda.

| Ayurvedic Concept     | Sanskrit Origin                              | Meaning                |
|-----------------------|--|------------------------|
| Ayus (आयुः)           | From root <i>i</i> ("to go, to live")        | Life span or longevity |
| Roganidana (रोगनिदान) | <i>Roga</i> = disease, <i>Nidana</i> = cause | Etiology of disease    |
| Aushadha (औषध)        | From <i>osadhi</i>                           | Medicinal plant/herb   |
| Rasayana (रसायन)      | <i>Rasa</i> = essence, <i>Ayana</i> = path   | Rejuvenation therapy   |

### Why Sanskrit is Irreplaceable for Ayurveda

1. **Exactness** – Minimizes risk of misinterpretation in drug formulation or therapeutic procedures.
2. **Mnemonic Value** – Verse format aids memorization by physicians.
3. **Cultural Continuity** – Maintains connection to original philosophical roots.
4. **Universality** – Scholars across India, despite dialectical differences, could communicate in Sanskrit.

## CONCLUSION

Sanskrit is more than an ancient tongue—it is a living bridge between India's past and present. Its precision and depth make it not just a historical relic but a vibrant tool for intellectual and spiritual exploration. The story of Sanskrit is one of resilience, adaptability, and timeless relevance.

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