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Sanskrit as Medium of Cinematic Expression

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on excerpts from address by Dr Shubhankar Mishra on the eve of World Sanskrit Day organized by Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius in collaboration with High Commission of India in Mauritius on 1 September 2023. His Excellency Prithvirajsing Roopun, President of Mauritius, graced the occasion as Chief Guest while Mrs K Nandini Singla High Commissioner of India in Mauritius was the guest of honour. In his address, Dr Mishra emphasized the significance Sanskrit as medium of cinematic expression while critiquing the evolution of Sanskrit cinema in India. Dr Mishra represents India in Mauritius as Deputy Secretary General at World Hindi Secretariat. He used the occasion to bolster the legacy of Sanskrit and emphasize the utility of this classical language in the post-modern world. Views of Dr Mishra hold ground as he has done Masters in Sanskrit from Delhi University and has undertaken doctoral research on representation of Sanskrit in Mass Media. He is also author of several books on Indian culture, art, and literature.

Keywords: Sanskrit, Sanskrit Cinema, Cinematic Expression, India

“Cinema is a popular medium. By choosing this medium, we get to reach out to a larger crowd and dispel all misconceptions about the Sanskrit language.” –Suresh Gayathri, Sanskrit Filmmaker (quoted by The New Indian Express, 19 November 2021)

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A renowned communication theorist, Marshall McLuhan, once famously stated, "The medium



is the message." This statement highlights the importance of the medium used to convey a message and how it can significantly impact its effectiveness. Language has been a fundamental tool for communication and societal progress throughout the history of human civilizations. It goes without saying that the classical languages have contributed significantly towards enriching cultures across the globe. However, Classical languages –an invaluable part of our shared

human heritage, have generally been neglected. Occasions like the World Sanskrit Day enable us to revisit the rich spectrum of classical languages and reposition them in contemporary multi-lingual and multi-cultural contexts.

World Sanskrit Day or *Vishva Samskrita Dinam* is a significant event that honours the ancient Indian language. Celebrated on the full moon day of *Shraavana Poornima*, which coincides with Raksha Bandhan, the festival aims to promote the revival and preservation of this language deeply ingrained in India's culture, heritage, and legacy. Since the Union government of India first celebrated World Sanskrit Day in 1969, it has been a crucial platform to raise awareness about Sanskrit's importance and reaffirm India's commitment to preserving its valuable knowledge and remarkable legacy.

It is heartening that Sanskrit is taught in a significantly good number of universities and colleges outside India. However, the languages do not survive merely by being part of academic discourses. Languages thrive on folksongs, folktales, theatre, and above all, the films. Good news is that some of the enthusiastic Indian film makers have already taken baby steps and one may expect that Sanskrit cinema would mature in next twenty years.

This article delves into the fascinating world of Sanskrit as a medium for cinematic expression. Sanskrit is an incredibly versatile language that has played a significant role as a medium in various fields, including lovemaking (*Kamasashtra*), statecraft (*Arthasastram*), and even theft (*Chorasastram*). While it is often associated with religious practices in Sanatan traditions, its scope and power go far beyond the realm of rituals. Sanskrit's unique ability to convey

complex ideas and express emotions precisely and eloquently makes it a fascinating and invaluable language that deserves greater recognition and study. By understanding Sanskrit, we can gain a deeper insight into India's linguistic and cultural heritage, unlocking a treasure trove of knowledge and wisdom.

From its humble beginnings to its modern-day usage, Sanskrit has played a vital role in shaping the landscape of Indian cinema. Despite its classical or archaic status, Sanskrit has a remarkable presence in the vibrant and dynamic world of national and international cinema. Over thirty Sanskrit films have been made since 1983, adding to the diverse and rich tapestry of Indian cinema. Despite the absence of a dedicated Sanskrit film industry, creative geniuses passionately produce films that continue to captivate audiences. It is a testament to the enduring power and versatility of the language that it remains a source of inspiration and creativity in the ever-evolving landscape of modern cinema. Sanskrit cinema is an undeniable masterpiece of art that uses mythology to explain complex philosophical, social, and scientific concepts to a broader audience. With more than thirty Sanskrit films premiering at international film festivals and theatres, this genre has gained tremendous popularity and critical acclaim. It has evolved to reflect changing times and tastes, making it a dynamic and versatile art form. From the first-ever Sanskrit film, *Adi Shankaracharya*, to *Yanam*, which showcases India's dream project, '*Mangalyān*' (Mars Orbiter Mission), Sanskrit films continue to push the boundaries of creativity and innovation.

Anurakthi, the first 3D Sanskrit film, and *Madhurasmitham*, the first Sanskrit film made exclusively for children, are just a few examples of how this genre has something new for everyone. The genre has a rich tradition of using storytelling to educate and inspire audiences worldwide. Punyakoti, an animated film based on a famous folksong of Karnataka, is an excellent example of how Sanskrit cinema can convey essential messages about living in harmony with nature in an entertaining and informative way. *Yānam*, another Sanskrit film, showcases the capabilities and expertise of the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and celebrates the contribution of Indian sages to the planets of the Solar System. Sanskrit cinema is a testament to the power of storytelling to make complex ideas accessible to everyone. It is a unique art form that has the potential to educate, inspire, and entertain people worldwide.

Sanskrit films have a rich history in India, starting with *Adi Shankaracharya* in 1983, the first-ever Sanskrit film directed by G.V. Iyer. At the 31st National Film Awards, the film won four awards, including Best Film, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography, and Best Audiography. The legacy was continued with *Bhagavad Gita* in 1992, which won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film. After a long gap of 22 years, Kerala produced four Sanskrit films between 2015 and 2017. *Priyamanasam* was the first film to come out of Kerala and won the Best Feature Film in Sanskrit award at the 63rd National Awards. *Ishti*, the first Sanskrit film based on a social issue, was screened at the 47th International Film Festival of India in Goa in 2016. The next movie, *Suryakantha*, explores contemporary life and won a special Jury award at the Kerala Film Critics Association Awards in 2017. *Anurakthi*, the first Sanskrit 3D film, was screened at the 48th International Film Festival of India in Goa in 2017 and had a song in 3D format. *Prakriti*, the first commercial film in Sanskrit, was written and directed by Dr. Nidheesh Gopi. *Punyakoti* was the first animated film in Sanskrit, and *Madhurasmitham* was the world's first children's Sanskrit film directed by Suresh Gayathri in 2019. Lastly, *Namo*, screened at IFFI in 2021, tells the story of the friendship between Sudama and Sri Krishna.

The brief history of Sanskrit films in India is rich and diverse, and these films are a valuable addition to India's cultural heritage. However, it is imperative that the governments as well as civil societies come forward to promote both films and theatre in Sanskrit. Sanskrit films are likely to rekindle interest of people in this classical language. Already, Central Sanskrit University, New Delhi has taken up ambitious project of producing short films in Sanskrit on various social issues. Some of the enthusiasts have also used YouTube to popularize Sanskrit movies. Dedicated film festivals to screen Sanskrit movies and documentary may be the way forward to popularize Sanskrit cinema across the globe. Meanwhile, people can relish the Sanskrit cinema on world wide web and provide food for thoughts to the wannabe films producers to take the classical language a bit seriously.

Further Readings

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