

The History of Ancient Sanskrit

By Ancient History Encyclopedia, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.20.17

Word Count **405**

Level **550L**



A young student studies Sanskrit scripts in Kathmandu, Nepal. Photo by: Niranjana Shrestha/AP.

Hinduism is a major religion in Southeast Asia. Sanskrit is its holy language. It is the language of the Hindu gods. Sanskrit is also used in Buddhism and other religions, as well. Sanskrit means perfectly or entirely done. Sanskrit is a complicated language with many words. It is still used today in religious writings and hymns.

The Sanskrit language was called a Deva-Vani. It means a gods language. Hindus think the god Brahma began it. It eventually spread on Earth. Sanskrit was written down about 2,500 years ago. The Rig Veda is a collection of hymns. It was the first writings in Sanskrit.

Sanskrit was used for ancient poetry, plays, science and religious books. There are many poems in Sanskrit. The language sounds very gentle. Experts think it came from listening to the sounds humans make.

A very large language

Early Sanskrit has 52 letters. Of those, 16 are vowels and 36 are consonants. These 52 letters have never been changed. Some Hindu experts say Sanskrit is the most perfect language.

The language is very large. It has hundreds of words to describe an idea or object. It has more than 250 words for rainfall. There are 67 words to describe water, and 65 words for earth.

India has 5,000 spoken languages. Sanskrit is the only sacred one. It is used in some parts of India as an everyday language. Very few people speak it, though. Mainly, it is used in hymns to the gods, and in songs.

Other languages borrowed Sanskrit words

Sanskrit has a big effect on other Indian languages, like Hindi. Hindi is the national language of India. It has given words to China and Tibet, as well. Both are Buddhist countries. Many Buddhist books are in Sanskrit. Buddhism is another important religion in Asia. Also, the countries Thailand and Sri Lanka have many similar words.

English has picked up many words from Sanskrit. For example, "attack" comes from "akramana" and "path" from "patha." Also, "man" comes from "manu." It means a male human. "Door" is from "dwar," meaning a doorway. English and Sanskrit belong to the same family of languages. The language family is called Indo-European.

Sanskrit has a long history. Ancient holy books were written in it. Many people admire the language. It is also difficult to learn. William Cooke Taylor was a historian and writer. He said a person could spend their entire life on Sanskrit and its writings.

Quiz

- 1 WHY do Hindu experts think Sanskrit is a perfect language?
 - (A) Many different types of books have been written in Sanskrit.
 - (B) The Sanskrit language has more than 250 words for rainfall.
 - (C) The Sanskrit language has given words to other languages.
 - (D) All of the Sanskrit letters have stayed the same over time.

- 2 What is a reason that few people speak Sanskrit?
 - (A) It is a hard language to learn.
 - (B) It is an old language.
 - (C) It is only used to write poems.
 - (D) It is only used to sing songs.

- 3 What information do you find in the section "Other languages borrowed Sanskrit words"?
 - (A) the time period in history when Sanskrit was first written down
 - (B) some words in English that came from Sanskrit
 - (C) the name of the Hindu god who created the Sanskrit language
 - (D) the meaning of the word "Sanskrit"

- 4 What does the section "A very large language" show you?
 - (A) that the Sanskrit language has a lot of words
 - (B) that many poems were written in Sanskrit
 - (C) that the Sanskrit language used to be called a Deva-Vani
 - (D) that the Rig Veda was the first writings in Sanskrit