

Strategic Transformation of Samskrit Institutions in India

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I have chosen to title my presentation as “The strategic transformation of Samskrit Institutions”. Being a professor in a premier management school in the country I thought I will share some of the processes and ideas pertaining to strategic transformation that may be relevant for us to discuss. At the outset I would like to clarify that the basic idea behind my presentation is to raise a few questions and not to point to some lacunae in the existing state of affairs in Samskrit matters in the country. Even when I point to some problems and limitations I beg your understanding that it is more to illustrate a problem and provide a context to ask some new questions. Perhaps we can collectively define these questions and refine it over the day through some discussions. If we take such an approach, I feel we would have spent the day very usefully. This is especially important since the people who have gathered here are very senior and important people with respect to Samskrit matters and wasting the time is an unaffordable idea. With this understanding I would like to put forth some thoughts in front of you.

The context for today’s discussion

There is a context for us to meet today and discuss. Every one of us know and there is no need for me to talk much about this. In a nutshell, the Global world order is simply cracking. Societies, Governments and Institutions have problems on every conceivable dimension. We have problems of sustainability, we have problems of dealing with ourselves - we are not able to handle self, management systems are collapsing, people face enormous stress in their working life as well as personal lives, public systems and institutions are collapsing for want of people with moral strength, values and courage, and the list can go on. The Western world has inherited some of the problems mentioned above much more than ours (such as sustainability, stress, understanding oneself etc.).

Think of the new found wonder called “bottled water”. Recently I was reading that in 2005 twenty six billion water bottles were manufactured, which required some 8 million tons of oil to manufacture these bottles. The manufacturing process put out several million tons of carbon dioxide into the eco-system. I saw a picture in which the Pacific Ocean in the bay area (San Francisco area) was fully littered with trashed water bottles. This is just one example of how we recklessly destroy the nature and threaten our own sustainability. Nature is self organizing and sustainable but unfortunately we humans are not. The current world order (largely designed on the basis of the western thinking) is yet to come to terms with this reality. We in India seem to be mindlessly and fast catching up with these issues. If you make one train journey in India you will get to know the number of plastic water bottle

¹ *This write up is based on the lecture delivered in a one day workshop on this topic arranged in New Delhi by the Samskrit Promotion Foundation on September 12, 2010.*

thrown out of the speeding trains that litter the entire stretch of the railway track in Indian Railways.

Our daily life is affected by hundreds of such ideas. The current world order is looking at things in a particular way and it is cracking. We are also very actively going after it. On the other hand every one present here know that these are all the things our ancestors have thought about and addressed in a different way. Ancestral wisdom provides potential alternatives for addressing many of the contemporary problems (इदमिदानीमेव प्रस्तुतवान् महोदयः मीमांसाद् न्यायविषये किमस्ति इति) which are all preserved in Samskrit. We all are very much aware of this. Furthermore, it appears that Samskrit has unique opportunities from a language perspective. I think Samskrit as a language can throw open several issues which can help us develop unique understanding. The other context for today's discussion is the status of Samskrit institutions and infrastructure in the country today. There are issues about Samskrit infrastructure and the eco system which I think has serious issues to be addressed. I am not making this observation as a statement of criticism on Samskrit matters or institutions. I am merely suggesting that we should have an open mind to churn the issues as much as we can. In this contextual background we may want to look at the few things today.

Drivers for strategic transformation of Samskrit institutions

I want to talk about 3 important things at the outset which may be useful for us in our discussion today on the issue of transforming the Samskrit institutions in the country. These three aspects, according to me are universal and relevant for our discussion today.

Value Migration is eternal

There is a concept of value migration (सर्वत्र वयम् एतस्मिन् विषये वदामः सर्वत्र एतस्मिन् विषये चर्चा अपि कुर्मः एतस्मिन् विषये consulting इत्यादि कुर्वन्तः एव स्मः). This concept of value migration is so universal that no organization in the world can escape. Let me explain this with some examples. (कानिचन उदाहरणानि अहं दातुम् इच्छामि). Encyclopedia Britannica, which is a 150 years plus old company went through a lot of problems. From a position of being a household name they reached a stage where selling the encyclopedia was becoming very difficult. Therefore, their revenues started falling. A few years back, what was once considered as a great company (and legacy) was eventually sold for a song. This was because the customers felt buying a set of 15 or 20 books of encyclopedia for a few thousand dollars was not the right method. It is costly (व्ययः अस्ति अधिकम्), it is very heavy and it cannot match with an encyclopedia made available in a 25 gms DVD which can carry all these information and provide even more in terms of connectivity and interactivity. The DVD will also cost a fraction only. Therefore the bound volumes of Britannica encyclopedia became less valuable in recent times.

The institution called Britannica may have had more than a hundred years of history. But that was not relevant to decide if this institution will continue in the future. Microsoft brought out an encyclopedia called Encarta in a CD weighing about 25 grams. They gave something which was far better than what we have in 15 odd volumes of the traditional book given by Britannica. Interactivity was there in Encarta; we can link from any page to any other related page. Britannica did not understand this aspect and perhaps thought nothing will happen to them. After all they had a great legacy. Finally they saw the light at the end of the day. Encyclopedia Britannica was challenged and was almost relegated to history.

The entire city of Bethlehem in the US had large steel mills. Today if we visit the city you will notice that the steel mills have all gone into history. They have literally become a museum piece. We have to buy a ticket and see how steel was made once upon a time there. The reason was very similar to what we saw in Britannica. A company called Nucor came and said अन्याया रीत्या कर्तुं शक्नुमः वा इति। Nucor introduced a new steel making process and showed that we need not have large scale steel mills. The existing large steel mills in the Bethlehem city thought that nothing will happen to them but the entire steel industry has gone. Like this there are several such examples.

There is a Honk Kong based company in the business of trading garments and textiles known as Li & Fung. This company began its operations in 1903. When they started the business, the grandfather Lee and the grandfather Fung (Fung brothers, the grandchildren run the business today) were speaking English and getting 20% Commission for this. US तः जनाः आगच्छन्ति। चैनाजनानाम् आङ्ग्लभाषाज्ञानं न आसीत्। अमेरिकजनानां चैनाभाषायाः ज्ञानं न आसीत्। उभयोः अपि मध्ये उपविष्य एकत्र आङ्ग्लभाषायां भाषणं अन्यत्र चैनीभाषायां भाषणम्। 20% commission. एवं प्रारम्भम् अभवत् in 1903.

In 1999 I read an interview about Li & Fung, in which they described how the way they were running the business has changed dramatically over the years. During 1999, they were getting 1½ % commission. In the interview they were mentioning that the business model was such that their performance was critically dependent on nearly half a million workers and five hundred Managing Directors who were not their employees. This is because in their business model, they work through a number of textile factories situated around the world. They mentioned that they owned nothing (in fact it is like saying that they own a smoke less factory!). So to deliver to their customers (like Walmart) garments in time they do a very complicated set of tasks and end up getting 1½ % commission. Contrast this with the situation when the company started in 1903. They were doing very simple things and getting 20% commission. This is value migration.

I believe that the context for today is the fact that value migrates all the time. वयं सर्वे value migration मार्गे एव गच्छन्तः स्मः। So I think this is an important point for us to think about

because this issue is very relevant for Samskrit Institutions also. असमाकं मनस्सु अपि एतादृशि कल्पना अत्यावश्यकी भवति । Let us keep this in mind when we talk about where we are going and from where we came.

Need for contextual relevance

The second thing is educational institutions have to relate the core activities to the current realities. This is the only way we can become relevant. This follows from the first principle of value migration. How do we make value migration in reality इति एकः प्रश्नः अस्ति । I think there are only two ways. If the educational institutions cannot relate to the current realities there is a very high risk of them vanishing, no matter how long they have been operating. Such institutions will become part of history instead of seeing the future. अस्मिन् विषये अपि दीर्घचिन्तनम् आवश्यकम् इति कथितुमिच्छामि । What is the current reality that the Samskrit institutions are facing? What is the society up to? Where are they going? What are the major problems that they face? Do we not have to address some of these and bring them into our own agenda? That is the contextual relevance. We cannot be “out of sync” with reality.

Are educational institutions in sync with reality or out of sync? I think we have to constantly ask this question and take necessary steps. It is the only philosophy for survival, renewal and rejuvenation. एकस्य व्यक्तेः एकस्य संस्थायाः अग्रेगमनं चिन्तनीयं चेत् Contextual relevance is the most important principle. तस्मात् एतस्मिन् विषये किञ्चित् चिन्तयन्तु इति अहं प्रार्थयामि ।

Focused approach to create discontinuities

The audience here represents the who’s who of the Samskrit institutions in the country in the higher education (university) domain. Between us we may have more than 500 man hours today. We also have Honourable Justice Lahotia and Shri Gopaldaswamy, who represent the highest offices of judiciary and legislature respectively. We also have several senior colleagues from the management, public policy, consulting, software and other academic domains. This is an indication of the enormous commitment and seriousness we all have collectively displayed for the cause. It also is indicative of the huge potential we have to make some important decisions.

My request is that we shall not get into a discussion on incremental aspects. Let us not, for example, end up saying we are now producing 20 papers and three books and conducting a certain number of seminars and we shall increase it to 22 papers and some more books and seminars. I believe that we should use this opportunity to break from the past, create a discontinuity in our ways of doing things for a larger cause that we may want to identify through the day. Only then the new path will come. Let us create discontinuity and identify new migration paths that enable us to make a significant transformation of the Samskrit institutions. By “breaking with the past” I do not mean abandoning what we are doing. I merely want to point out to a world of possibility in which we add new activities, create new

initiatives and work with a renewed purpose and mission. If we take such an approach, I believe it is worth all the effort and the time that we all are going to spend today across the table.

The other issue is the focus that we must have while deliberating on several issues. Let us focus on what we can do rather than what others are not doing and what others can do तस्मिन् विषयं पृथक्कृत्वा एतस्मिन् विषये सुधीर्घतया अस्माभिः किञ्चित् चिन्तनीयमिति वक्तुं इच्छामि ।

Therefore, my suggestion is that we shall focus on what we can do. It is much easier to convince that there are a host of other institutions, the government and the society in general who are not doing enough on Samskrit matters. It helps us in no way discussing these problems and issues that others need to do. For example, it is possible to discuss in great detail as to how government funding is drying out or how students and the public show little interest on Samskrit. These discussions can distract us, develop defensive positions and view points and could turn out to be counterproductive for the day. At best we can recognize these as constraints and hurdles and yet stay focused on the issue of what we need to do.

Time to raise several questions

What does strategic transformation mean to us? As I was suggesting a while ago, let us make it a significant transformation not an incremental one. What does it mean to the field of Samskrit teaching, education and the research if we want to really break with the past and move forward? What are the three drivers of passion toward Samskrit for the society in general and to the youth in particular?

You would agree with me that in an exercise of this kind it is very useful to raise as many questions as we can. I urge all of you to encourage everyone to raise more questions about our own assumptions about the reality around us and the role we need to play as heads of Samskrit institutions. We shall also raise a few questions about our own mental models. संस्कृतक्षेत्रे कथं वा अग्रेगन्तव्यमिति अस्मिन् विषये अस्माकं mental model needs to be understood, clarified and refined if required. In the worst case we need to be ready even to discard some part of it. After all our ancestral wisdom informs us that raising questions, albeit in a structured, sensible and respectful manner, was an integral part of our evolution and creation of new knowledge, thought processes and institutions. In line with this healthy tradition I would like to pose a few questions just to facilitate the process of the day long discussions. Some of these questions are in my mind and emanating primarily out of my little association with Samskrit matters for the last 20 years. We can consider these discussions for deliberation, refinement or even to discard it altogether and instead frame new questions differently. वयं अस्मिन् विषये गोष्ठ्यां सुधीर्घतया चर्चाम् कृत्वा अग्रे गच्छामः ।

How important is it for us to pay serious attention to Samskrit teaching in various institutions? That may be a very important question for us to ask. If we look at how Latin has disappeared finally (which happened 125 years back), we may want to draw some parallels to Samskrit. I think Latin first went out of the primary schools, and then from colleges and Universities. After that Latin was mainly confined to research institutes. From there also it

was removed and then it went into the hands of very specialized few researchers. तस्मात् 6
एतस्मिन् विषये अपि अस्माभिः चिन्तनीयमस्ति ।

20 days back I was invited to the Samskrit department of a well known University. When we were driving from the airport to the University (it took more than an hour) I tried to have a conversation with the Samskrit teacher who came to receive me at the airport. He knew only Bengali, which I could not speak and therefore Samskrit was the only link language between the two of us. Out of the one hour it took 40 minutes for him to start the conversation in Samskrit. Slowly it developed and it was very good. Why do we have this problem? Can we think of one example in which the language teacher has no proficiency in communication and oratory skills in the language? What is the implication of this? What impact it creates in the institution and what are the consequences? How important is this in the long run?

Another problem which I have come across and I have been sharing with some likeminded people like you is that our Samskrit teachers are not able to mainstream themselves. इत्युक्ते आधुनिकविषयमुपयुज्य तेन द्वारा संस्कृत क्षेत्रे कीदृशानि कार्यानि कर्तव्यानि इति प्रश्नः । If we are not mainstreaming somewhere it takes enormous efforts to connect the bridges and be part of the current day realities. When we are able to mainstream it provides new agenda for the institutions. आधुनिक विषये चिन्तनम् संशोधनमपि भवति । आधुनिकजनेभ्यः किमपि व्यवस्थामपि कर्तुम् शक्नुमः । एतत्सर्वम् अस्माभिः चिन्तनीयमिति मम अभिप्रायः ।

My friend was recently telling me that in a well known college in Chennai there are only two students who have taken Samskrit and there are 7 professors in the Samskrit department. This is to me a serious issue and is indicative of a deeper problem in hand. Let us not run away from this problem. Why are the students not having the passion and interest in Samskrit? Is it an issue of contextual relevance that we spoke about? Do we need to urgently address this issue? In the last 15 years, in Bengaluru, I notice that in several good colleges the number of students taking Samskrit is on the decline. I think this is an issue we may want to squarely face at the outset. If we can't find the answer for this we may be putting a lot of effort परन्तु एतस्य किं भवति इति वक्तुं वयं न शक्नुमः । अतः एव अहं भवतां पुरतः प्रस्थपितवान् अस्मि ।

There is a perceived stagnancy in the field of Samskrit. सर्वत्र जनानां मनसि एतादृशी कल्पना उत्पन्ना अस्ति । तत् सत्यं वा न वा इति ज्ञातव्यमस्ति । असत्यं चेत् किमर्थं तादृशी कल्पना उत्पन्ना? तस्य निवारणार्थं किं करणीयम्? अस्मिन् विषये अपि अस्माभिः चिन्तनीयमस्ति । Because we are not able to attract the best students for Samskrit learning. I was already telling about dwindling student strength in Samskrit courses. I wonder if the teaching and research agenda for the teachers are also coming down. So I think this is another issue which we may want to think about for the day. My biggest request is to bring the 'Shivatatva' into Samskrit institutions. We should

do creative destruction. अतः एव management क्षेत्रे यदा कदापि वयम् Consultancy कुर्मः एतस्मिन् 7
विषये एव अधिकं वदामः । I think the problem with the many of us everywhere is a strong mind
set and that is what will determine a lot of things that we do. एतस्मिन् विषये अस्माभिः अग्रे
गन्तव्यमेव । So we should bring Shiva into our institutions. Create that destruction out of
which the new creation will happen. Joseph Schumpeter in 1950 presented a paper in the
theme of innovation through creative destruction. In the economics field बहु उत्तममिति
कथयन्ति । एतदेव शिवतत्त्वं नाम । अस्मिन् विषये अपि अध्य वयं चर्चाम् कुर्मः ।

There are several assumptions surrounding the working of Samskrit institutions and we need to very seriously question them with the spirit of “Shivatatva”. Let me point to one of them. Government support will be permanent and a driving force behind several things that Samskrit institutions will do the in the future. Why do we want to challenge this assumption? Perhaps out of this some new ideas will come. It will help us chalk out the kind of things we may have to do. It may help us rejuvenate, recharge and reposition our institutions. Let me give you an example.

In IIM Bangalore sometime in the mid 90s we had repeated discussion on the same subject and we finally came to the conclusion that the Government may not support us. We decided that we will take this as the emerging reality. It guided us in many ways to restructure our activities, channelize our efforts and reposition the institution appropriately. It was by and large true. One fallout of this is that today we have fully covered ourselves with adequate corpus fund for meeting all the obligations of terminal benefit (such as pension, gratuity etc.). The corpus fund is very significant, but what is even more significant is our ability to adjust ourselves to the reality and facing it.

Once IIMs were the institutes of spending, today IIMs are the institutes of earning. When I was a student whenever there was a small program in the campus we used to photocopy 500 copies of the program sheet and leave it in the student’s mess. न कोपि एतत् पश्यन्ति आसन् । अन्ते सर्वं व्यर्थम् अभवत् । We were spending like that because it was a institute of spending. Today we will never do such things. We constantly ask how do we make relevant to today and tomorrow. Only out of contextual relevance stems our ability to remain as an institute of earning. Needless to say, financial earning is preceded by earning the reputation of the people, students and other beneficial stakeholders.

Another related assumption that we may want to challenge is “Private and corporate entities may not fund and support Samskrit activities”. Is this a valid assumption? Why can’t we challenge this?

We seem to hold certain assumptions pertaining to the teaching methodology deployed in Samskrit institutions. I wonder if many of us think that this is a non issue. It may be very useful to question this assumption as well. There are related aspects to samskrit teaching: what to teach and/or how to teach. There are a few possibilities here to discuss:

- What to teach is important but how to teach is not important
- What to teach is not important but how to teach is important
- What to teach as well as how to teach are both important

As an outsider to the system I get a feeling that the dominant view is that what to teach is important but not how to teach. I think we may want to discuss these issues and question some of our assumptions. This is especially crucial because it may provide some answers for the dwindling student population in samskrit institutions across the country.

How to connect Samskrit with modern society? I think unless we engage in contextually relevant activities, unless we are able to connect to the reality many of the problems that we face will increase in magnitude, scale and scope. We must search for some answers to this question as well. There are several developments that we see around us and we may want to ask how to embrace them and work with these. One of them is technology (primarily Internet and related technologies). Many of us will agree that technology can play a very big role in bringing new world of possibilities to bridge gaps and improve reach and productivity. I think sometimes getting delayed is alright because we may be able to leapfrog others. Some others have tried to use technology and have failed. We can learn from these experiences and skip many things and go straight. तस्मात् साक्षात् उपरि गमनस्य मार्गः सुलभतया प्राप्स्यते । May be technology will enable us sort out some of the problems and take us straight to a different level. Waiting anymore is not good.

How do we connect the vast legacy and history of Samskrit language, knowledge and ideas with the modern subjects and the current society? What kind of new orientation should we attempt now? How do we address the important issue of contemporary literature creation? Can we think very seriously about the kind of issues we have to address? Today's technology makes us believe that we are in a flat world, a connected world and perhaps in the making of a knowledge village. I think every one of this key word must influence our thinking today. What is the meaning of these words which has become so common place in the world today? Should we have to just discard it or should we say in the light of this we need to change some our activities.

Creating conditions for a sustainable transformation

I have merely raised several questions with a hope of churning our thoughts. You may agree with me that all of them may not be of equal importance. We may have to explore some of these questions in some detail and refine them through the day. We need to discuss these issues in some detail through the day. Perhaps some ideas and suggestions may come out of the discussions during the day. May be we can create a structure that promote collaborations. Structure and collaboration are very important to make a strategic transformation of the Samskrit institutions. We have to do a number of things together, therefore without collaboration it will be very difficult for us to proceed. Once we have a collaborative structure can we have agenda which is sustainable? Sustainable means न केवलं

एकः उपावेशः न केवलं एकं मासम् न केवलं एकं वर्षम् इतोऽपि गच्छताकालेन अस्माभिः तस्य बृहती
कर्तव्यदृष्ट्या चिन्तनीयम्।

Sustainable transformation of this state of affairs requires not only an agenda but also a long term vision? The vision will guide us where we need to focus our efforts for the next 5 – 10 years. We have to keep constantly thinking about two steps or three steps on a year on year basis. Can we create a process for setting timetables, actions and targets? In order to ensure sustainability we also need to have structured meetings, taking stock of the progress. Can the core group meet once in a year very formally. The group can seriously review the progress and make sense of what is really happening? Where have we moved? What are the new things that we have learned? What are the new areas that we have taken up? We can consolidate our learnings and then move forward.

I would conclude my reminding all of us that value migration demands that we think very seriously about the issue of contextual relevance. My humble suggestion is that let us harp on this; otherwise our institutions will be relegated to the history. While we are anxious about the state of Samskrit institutions we are also enthusiastic in participating in this cause of strategic transformation. We are ready to help you in this process.