

## Paninian from Paris

Suganthy Krishnamachari



Dr. Pierre Filliozat. Photo: M.A. Sriram

Special Arrangement



Dr. Filliozat in Mysore. Photo: M.A. Sriram

Special Arrangement

***“In a sense, no old language is a living one, because all languages change, and that is a fact of history.”***

After establishing contact with Dr. Pierre Sylvain Filliozat, I had to wait for many months to interview him, because he spends six months of the year in Paris and six months in India, and even while in India, he is travelling, giving lectures, and visiting temples.

Son of Dr. Jean Filliozat, founder of the French Institute, Pondicherry, Dr. Pierre Filliozat is this year’s Presidential awardee for Sanskrit (International). Filliozat studied classical languages in Paris, and Vyakarana and Saiva agamas in Pondicherry, under M. S. Narasimhacharya and N.R. Bhatt, respectively. He learnt about Visishtadvaita too from



Narasimhacharya. According to Dr. Filliozat, Manipravala, used in Vaishnava commentaries, is a unique, difficult language, because it is an amalgam of classical Tamil and Sanskrit.

Dr. Filliozat talks of the resilience of Sanskrit and points to how it not only borrowed words from other languages but assimilated them, thereby enriching itself. The Vedic root - 'nrt' means 'to dance.' But in Middle Indian, the vowel 'r' is replaced by 'a.' So in Middle Indian, 'nrt' becomes 'nat.' In his list of roots, Panini gives both 'nrt' and 'nat' for dance. Panini extracted roots from other languages and applied his rules to them.

Dr. Filliozat says Sanskrit pandits created a remarkable technical vocabulary for mathematics, astronomy, logic, etc. He expresses his admiration for the complicated sentences of the nyaya texts, where one noun is followed by many adjectives, and a sentence covers a whole page. "This style is seen in poetry too, as for example, Banabhatta's Kadambari." How can something so complex be appealing? "The complexity is what makes it appealing. There is a saying in Sanskrit that a grape yields its sweetness as soon as it is bitten, but the taste soon disappears. Sugarcane is tough to chew, but the sweet taste lingers. So it is with Sanskrit poetry. Reading repeatedly, to catch all the suggested meanings, is a pleasurable exercise."

Talking of the oral tradition of learning, Dr. Filliozat points to Panini's use of auditory markers to indicate properties and operations of grammatical elements. When grammar came to be written, pandits did not use symbols to indicate "tone and adventitious nasalisation which had disappeared." Instead they mentioned these properties in the manuscripts. Panini also resorts to ellipsis. He deliberately omits repeating words, which have the same syntactical constructions in consecutive propositions, but the term is implied. "Someone like my teacher Narasimhacharya, had no difficulty following any of this, because he had committed the Sutras to memory. But if you are using a book, you will have a tough time."

So, given the oral tradition, would a literate person in Paninian times be defined as one who was master of the spoken word? "Yes, indeed. Even in recent times, we had a pandit called Abhyankar, in Pune, who could not read and write, but authored books on Sanskrit grammar and Advaita. Scribes would take down as he dictated his books. So here we have an example of a very great scholar, who, in modern terminology, would be termed illiterate!"

Dr. Filliozat says, "Patanjali considered that a person could learn a language, without studying the grammar, that there was a language that was innate." That sounds like Chomsky, I exclaim! Chomsky said that all human beings are born with a language faculty. According to Chomsky, to say that someone knows a language is to state that his language faculty is in that state. So could we say Patanjali was an ancient Chomsky, I ask. "You could say that," laughs Filliozat. "Patanjali was concerned with very broad linguistic issues."

Was Sanskrit the language of one community alone? "No. In the Shadvamsa Brahmana, for example, a Brahmin teacher prefers his student from another sect because the latter is smarter. Patanjali himself recognises the excellence of a coachman who corrects a grammarian."

Dr. Filliozat's definition of Sanskrit is somewhat different from the usual. He says one must go beyond mere etymology while defining Samskrita. Samskara, which comes from the same root, means preparation for an action. Samskaras in everyday life make us fit for various activities. Language is Samskrita, when it is accompanied by a rule-based grammar such as Panini's. Because of this "samskara of grammar," the language Samskrita is perfect, for the "functioning of the mind in every field of activity."

Talking of the geographical spread of Sanskrit, Dr. Filliozat says that in South Indian inscriptions, the panegyric which speaks of the greatness of kings was in Sanskrit, because Sanskrit was known beyond the borders of the Indian sub-continent, and foreigners would know of the greatness of a king, only if he was written about in Sanskrit. Chinese pilgrims could stop over at Sumatra, learn Sanskrit, and then come to India, linguistically equipped to travel all over the country!

According to Filliozat, Sanskrit is a living language. But it is nobody's mother tongue, I counter. "Even in the last census, there were people who declared Sanskrit their mother tongue. Many institutions and pandits keep Sanskrit alive. There is even a Sanskrit daily, called Sudharma, which has been in circulation for 45 years. It gives political news and even has an editorial."

"In a sense, no old language is a living one, because all languages change, and that is a fact of history." What about Tamil? "Do you speak the beautiful Tamil of the Sangam period?" he asks.

Dr. Filliozat has a Ph.D. in Alankara Sastra, and taught Sanskrit in Paris. He has published 20 books on various subjects including Ashtadyayi, Patanjali's Mahabhashya and Vedanta Desika's Varadaraja Panchasat.

### **Partner in research**

Dr. Filliozat's wife Vasundhara, whose Ph.D. is on Vijayanagar inscriptions, talks about Lakula Saivism. She says its foundation was Vedic, and of its four branches, Kalamukha and Pasupatha came to South India and were popular in Karnataka from the 6th century C.E. onwards. Lakulisa Pasupathas pioneered Trikotalayas, where the main sanctum was for Siva, in whose supremacy they believed, with two sanctums for other deities. Wherever they built temples, Lakulisa Pasupathas established schools, where grammar, Vedanta and yoga were taught. A special salary was given to teachers of Kaumara vyakarana. "In Khajuraho, there is a sculpture of Skanda holding a manuscript. The people there say the manuscript is Kaumara vyakarana, although they do not know where it was taught. Colebrook made a copy of a manuscript of Kaumara Vyakarana, which he found in Moodbidri Jaina matha, in Karnataka, and this copy is in India Office Library, London."

Vasundhara feels that French scholars of Sanskrit are not as widely known in India as their work warrants. “The first European professor of Sanskrit was Frenchman Chezy, who gave his first lecture in 1815. Chezy found a Bengali manuscript of Kalidasa’s Sakuntalam in Paris. So he learnt Bengali, transliterated the text to Devanagari and then translated it to French. Burnoff translated Srimad Bhagavatam and a portion of the Ramayana into French. Neither of them visited India!”

Vasundhara is a recipient of Kannada Rajyotsava Award, and has co- authored books on Saiva temples with her husband, whom she met while studying under his father in Paris.

Keywords: [Dr. Pierre Sylvain Filliozat](#), [Presidential awardee for Sanskrit](#)

 **Search** Search for your favourite learning/education products on Amazon.in

Go