

# After 100 Years, Sanskrit Alive and Well at Cal

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A hundred years ago, the University of California at Berkeley staged the first-ever Sanskrit play on U.S. soil, Kalidasa's "Mrchch-hakatika" (The Little Clay Cart). The play was produced under the aegis of Arthur W. Ryder, who was appointed professor of classics in 1906 and began teaching Sanskrit after joining Berkeley.

Ryder was a pioneering and dynamic promoter of Sanskrit studies. Among his extraordinary achievements are his translations of many Sanskrit works which remain among the most authoritative today. The reach of his influence can also be traced to J. Robert Oppenheimer's utterance of the line from the Gita, "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds," upon witnessing the Trinity atomic fireball in August 1945.

Over a century after the staging of Kalidasa's play, the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies and the Center for South Asia Studies celebrated 101 years of Sanskrit instruction at Berkeley with an event addressed by Janet Broughton, dean of arts and humanities at UC Berkeley, visiting Sanskrit scholar R.K. Sharma, and Berkeley academics Robert P. Goldman, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, Gary Holland, Padma-



At an event at the University of California at Berkeley hosted by the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies and the Center for South Asia Studies to mark 101 years of Sanskrit instruction at Berkeley (l-r): Ram Karan Sharma, Dean Broughton and professors Alexander von Rospatt, Robert Goldman and Sally Sutherland Goldman.

nabh S. Jaini, Som Dev Vasudeva and Alexander von Rospatt.

Goldman told *India-West* that the event brought much-needed focus on a classical language and its scholarship that tends to get lost in the shuffle in a typical Western university.

"Sanskrit helps us understand the cultural history of the ancient world which is so narrowly viewed usually through that lens of the classic Eurocentrism of Greeks, Romans," he said. "South Asianists and Sanskritists really feel like a little bit of an isolated corner in the university which is so Eurocentric. We thought it would be a good opportunity to show off a little bit what we do. And I think some of the people were quite enlightened. The dean of humanities . . . was very im-

pressed."

Goldman stressed that it is wrong to pigeonhole Sanskrit into a sectarian niche.

"Sanskrit is a kind of a cultural, intellectual unifying factor through all of Southern Asia, it shouldn't be thought of simply as a sectarian language because it is actually in a sense the intellectual medium of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism," he said. "Through Sanskrit language the knowledge systems of ancient India were spread into various corners of Asia, Southeast Asia, China, Japan through Buddhism, and so a lot of the inscriptions, the political systems, the scientific discoveries were taken up by different cultures — sometimes without any real recognition that they were South Asian in origin, like the mathematics and the astronomy taken up by the Arabs and coming to Europe in that way."

He said the value of Sanskrit



At an event at the University of California at Berkeley to mark 101 years of teaching Sanskrit, lighting of the Jnanadeep by Janet Broughton, dean of arts and humanities at UC Berkeley, and Ram Karan Sharma

was more, not less, at a time when interest in contemporary India was growing exponentially.

"Suddenly South Asia is very important and everybody is interested in the economy and strategic issues, which is important," he said. "But, you know, people need to know something about the cultural history, the past as well."

The region has a long tradition, and some contemporary issues are connected to its ancient past, he said.

"You have this very long continuous cultural history in South Asia," he said. "It's really not entirely possible to understand contemporary South Asian politics or society without knowing something about the tradition. Because, you see, the politics now as it breaks down on Hindutwa issues, Mandir-masjid kind of things, all

of these things are rooted in this traditional culture."

Goldman said that while people who chose to specialize in Sanskrit may be a handful, Sanskrit-related classes drew a lot of students.

CSAS chair Raka Ray told *India-West* the center was celebrating Sanskrit instruction at Berkeley for several reasons. "One, of course, is to mark the long and serious tradition of the study of South Asia at Berkeley," she said. "The second reason has to do with Sanskrit itself. At a time when even Cambridge is closing its doors to Sanskrit (though London's SOAS had to bring it back in the face of great protest when they tried to remove Sanskrit from their curriculum), I think it is important to celebrate our commitment to this major classical language."

**Indian Ambassador Honored**