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05/30/06

An article on the recently concluded four-day Sanskrit camp by Samskrita Bharati.

ATTENDING A SANSKRIT SPEAKING CAMP

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Last week, I overheard my older son telling his carpool pal, “We’re going to some camp that my mom wants us to go to.” A teenager periodically struggling for approbation; clearly, there was an awkwardness for him to spell out what the camp was about. Sighing within, I hoped that this embarrassment would soon dissipate. What I did not know then was how quickly this would vanish and even morph into something more than I had hoped for.

The camp was scheduled for four days from Friday, May 26, 2006 to Monday, May 29, 2006 and we had to report on Thursday. So, we arrived at Schuylkill Manor, PA on Thursday evening. Nestled amidst the rolling hills and sylvan surroundings of central Pennsylvania lies a temple complex called Vraj Bhoomi. We initially learnt of it only when the Sanskrit camp location was announced. We were pleasantly surprised at the size of Vraj Bhoomi (nearly 300 acres), and the colossal efforts underway to create a lasting temple complex. Once the hundred plus participants arrived, the focus shifted to figuring out room locations, unpacking, arranging, introductions, etc. It was a rather uneventful evening that culminated in a late dinner.

Our first day began with a yoga session completely directed in Sanskrit by Sri C. Krishna Shastry. Despite our woefully inadequate understanding of Sanskrit, not only were we able to flawlessly follow the directives issued in Sanskrit but were also enthused to try out the various postures. Of course, the demonstration that preceded the instructions was a big help! The Sanskrit classes begin in full earnestness that morning, each of us segregated based on prior learning and practice levels. My husband and septuagenarian mother were in the beginner level class, with limited inkling on what to expect. My sons left with their age mates, partly diffident about the instruction. Having attended Samskrita Bharati classes over the past year at Sri Venkateshwara temple in Pittsburgh, I had some clue on what to expect. Their emphasis was on learning the Sanskrit language primarily through listening and speaking, with grammar embedded therein. My family quickly learnt that note-taking and memorizing are not pre-requisites to learning the basics of spoken Sanskrit. Though each group had one teacher assigned to them, the participants were enriched by the varied teaching styles of different instructors. During the break that afternoon, my sons dropped a few Sanskrit words in their conversation. Some change, I thought!

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The founder of Sanskrita Bharati, Sri C.K. Shastry addressed the gathering twice each day. He passionately spoke in Sanskrit, and those powerful speeches stirred a lot of emotions in me. Admittedly, I was left with a feeling of regret that I had not acquired Sanskrit fluency earlier in life. Further, his emphasis on “doing something, and thereby leading a meaningful life” resonated powerfully within me. At midlife, these were feelings that had surfaced many times within me, especially each birthday when I took stock of my possible remaining longevity. I silently reiterated within, “Yes, I need to sharpen my focus and do something!”

Each evening, we had an entertainment program put forth by various participants. The skits were hilarious, and made us rock with laughter. The humor came forth despite any language barrier, and it was becoming more apparent to each of us that Sanskrit had unfairly been dubbed a ‘difficult’ language. Whether it was the futuristic spoof on Sanskrit usage, the amusing mock interviews on television, or the Sanskritized rendering of a Bollywood dance number, the evening programs enabled us to shed our inhibitions about the language.

Using Sanskrit expressions, participants of all age groups played several different games each evening. Playing tag with Sanskrit terms was just as fun (and tiring!) as any other language! We enjoyed the delicious food served at each meal, and particularly, the conscious emphasis to offer meal hospitality using Sanskrit phrases! Throughout our stay, the opportunity to learn the language was always there. Inevitably, a congenial atmosphere had emerged from four days of jam-packed learning, laughter and merriment. The Sanskrita Bharati volunteers worked tirelessly to ensure that camp would be meaningful for everyone. Speaking at the valedictory function, one of the volunteers of the camp, Giridharan Bharathan mentioned that a total of 108 people participated in the camp. Participants were from nine states including Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Florida and California as well as two attendees from Canada.

On the way back home, we talked uninterruptedly about each person’s experience at camp. My mother was determined to spread information about Sanskrita Bharati, my husband articulated his enthusiasm to learn the language, and both boys expressed their determination to recruit friends to attend next year. After we unpacked and proceeded to retire for the night, I heard my sons call out “Amba, shubha raatrih.” (Good night, mother). Phew! What a difference one Memorial weekend can make!! And, for the Kalavar family this one will always be memorable!

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Photo 1 : The Secretary of Sanskrita Bharati , Shri C Krishna Sastry conducting a class at the camp.

