

Teaching Kannada To Our Children

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What is culture?

There are probably many ways to characterize a culture including music, food, customs, religion, and festivals. It is my belief however that, more than anything else, *language* is the preeminent aspect of any culture, and perhaps can be viewed as a window into a culture. If you agree with me, it is incumbent on us as emigrant Kannadigas to share the language with our children. As devoted parents we are constantly striving to influence our children with our values, our tastes in music, food and the arts, and so many other biases we might have, most of which would probably not be very important in the long run. Why is our language then any less important? In fact, many of the other aspects of culture cannot stand by themselves; without a sound understanding of the words, a Purandara Daasa krithi doesn't really have the impact it deserves to have. Hence I argue that language is the basis of any culture, and if our children don't get the language, they don't get the culture either; at best, they might get a diluted version of it.

Is Kannada worth the attention we are giving to it?

Kannada is an ancient language that predates many Indo-European derivatives such as English and Hindi. In fact, the current thinking is that proto-Dravidian from which Kannada is derived is probably related to the (as yet undeciphered) ancient language of the Indus Valley civilization. It has a rich literary history although much of its earlier creations have been lost in the volatile dust of history. In modern times, it has been enriched by illustrious writers who have together bagged more Jnanapeeth awards (the highest literary award in India) than writers in any other Indian language. Hence, once a child has picked up some proficiency in Kannada there is no dearth of literature from which a lifetime of enrichment and pleasure can be derived.

Problems

So, let us say my arguments are very persuasive and we would all like to goad our kids into learning Kannada. As with everything else, there are problems. The problems are probably obvious but I will enunciate them anyway. In the highly monolingual United States, we are surrounded by the Anglo culture and language. Our children's friends speak English all the time, whether they are white, black, or Indian. Our own speech has largely transmogrified into a *Kanglish* with English expressions occupying a significant percentage of our vocabulary. In fact, with all my interest in Kannada I have trouble expressing myself exclusively in Kannada. In addition, we would like our children to be very proficient in English, and would not want their Kannada proficiency to come at the expense of their command of the English language. Many of our friends are non-Kannada people, be they white or Indian. The biggest problem however seems to be this: although there is excellent literature in Kannada, the instructional material for educating children is woefully inadequate. Children's books (we have picked up scores of them in India) are drab, uninteresting, poorly illustrated, and completely out of context, especially for our children growing up in American suburbia. Kannada script is incredibly complicated with myriad symbols, and as an adult, I now recognize it as the most complicated of the five languages I have learned to read and speak over my lifetime.

Our Solutions: A Personal Experience

Let me outline our own solutions to these problems and describe the (admittedly limited) success we have had.

- The first thing we did as parents is to start when our kids were very young. Frequently, I see Kannada parents cooing to their newborns in English and, since language in its early stages is primarily acquired from parents, I think this child has nary a chance to pick up even rudiments of Kannada. When they get to the critical age of 3 or 4, when they are perhaps in daycare, or interacting with other children, they show the first signs of rejecting their mother tongue: they talk back in English. When our children did that, they did not get a response from either of us. Plain and simple: “Speak Kannada if you want me to talk to you!” This seems especially insensitive, except for the fact that we had to do this only once in a while. Moreover, it is in no way different from a disciplinary statement used to instill politeness or to discourage use of obscenities.
- The second thing we have done is to portray the whole matter as one of pride. Although it is not correct, we have told them repeatedly that kids who know two languages are smarter than those who know only one. Actually, there does happen to be some empirical data that the human brain develops differently when you are bilingual; of course, the crack about intelligence is patently untrue, but has been used only as a motivating factor.
- We play word games often, especially when we travel long distances by car. Simple games are “Anthaakshari” played with words rather than songs. Also, a simple word game where they have to give Kannada words for English words. When we did this, we have used the children to challenge us; for example, kids are allowed to ask us challenging words like “ecology” for which we would need to supply a Kannada word. I would ask my son a simple word like “elbow.” This levels the playing field, and the children feel superior for stumping us, and, at the same time, develop enormous pride in their abilities. Also, there are times when we have an “English-free” period (say 15 minutes) when all of us strive to use Kannada words only, and a written record is kept of how many English words are used by whom.
- I have developed some of my own material for teaching them to read Kannada. The easiest procedure has been to write stories that were loosely based on standard fairy tales and to paste over English words in a nicely illustrated book. Such a book is quite superior to a book you might pick up in Bangalore for motivating a six-year old. (At higher levels there is some good advanced material that can be picked up in India, especially in Mysore.) More such teaching material would be simple Kannada crosswords, “seek a word” kind of puzzles and so on. The main point is that the Kannada learning material needs to be as entertaining as all their other learning material in English to keep them motivated.

Closure

Of course, as anybody who has done this can testify, it is a constant struggle. We have to constantly remind them to speak in Kannada. Their language tends to be bookish, there are some gaping holes in vocabulary, and reading sessions are sometimes agonizing. On the positive side, learning Kannada has not negatively affected our children's English proficiency; it has perhaps only strengthened it. In spite of my strong assertion at the beginning of this article, I don't know if my children will retain what we have tried to instill in them. I don't even know if we need to do this since I don't know what turns their lives will take. The only thing I can say for sure is that, if we did **not** teach them Kannada, it is a certainty that they will **not** know it, and the last Kannadiga in my family would be me!