

The Prakrit : A Review

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Namisādhū seems to have struck the right note when he explains the word *Prākṛta* as derived from *prakṛti* in the sense of natural speech free from the rules of grammarians. He wrote it in 1068 A. D. when the literary forms of Prakrit had already been fossilized. The other explanation offered by him, deriving it from *Prāka kṛta*, to mean 'created of old', is in consonance with his faith that the language of the *Āṛṣa* canon, *Ardha-Māgadhī*, is the language of the gods, and is not very relevant to philological discussion.

In the sixties of the 19th century E. B. Cowell brought out Vararuci's *Prākṛta-Prakāśa* with the *Manoramā* commentary of Bhāmaha, and thenceforth Prakrit has engaged the attention of many linguists and indologists. The pioneers in the field are Hermann Jacobi, Richard Pischel, A. F. R. Hoernle, George Buhler, Sten Konow, A. C. Woolner, Muni Jina Vijaya, Banarasi Das Jain and A. N. Upadhye. The linguistic survey of George Grierson, the philological deliberations of Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the volumes of Maurice Winternitz on the history of Indian literature, the discovery of Prakrit and Sanskrit texts, and an in-depth study of the Pali, Prakrit, Apabhramsa and Sanskrit works, as also of the epigraphic and numismatic material, during the last one hundred years or so, have expanded and elaborated the problem of the linguistic bases of the Indian panorama.

During all this effort a bias was assiduously tilted towards finding some remote ancestry to link the Indian intelligentsia with the Euro-Anglican rulers, to build up the myth that India was a no-man's land and it was filled by the Dāsa (Dravidians), Nisāda (Austrians), Kirāta (Mongoloids) and Ārya (Nordics, the vast Indo-European community, branching off to the Indo-Iranian from which shot out the Indo-Aryans who composed the Vedas in the Sapta-Sindhu), and lastly, to consign the entire literary effort, nay the speech effort itself, to the Indo-Aryan genius as if whoever preceded them were a mute people. The fallacy of this stupendous task is obvious but the emotional strains ingrained therein dissuade from an objective appraisal.

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To put it briefly, the Indian linguistic history has been built up on the premise that there are three strata of language development in India, firstly, the Old Indo-Aryan representing successively the Vedic, the Brāhmaṇa and the classical (developed out of the *Udīcyā* or northern dialect of the Vedic Aryans and codified by Pāṇini) Sanskrit; secondly, the Middle Indo-Aryan, representing the Prakrits developing out of the *Madhyadeśīya* and *Prācya* dialects of the Vedic-Aryans, and the Apabhramsa, a further debasement of the *Deva-bhāṣā*; and lastly, the New Indo-Aryan representing different *vibhāṣā* which finally emerged as the present-day vernaculars.

Three potent factors have been kept out of sight in projecting this development. One such factor is that Sanskrit was confined to a small minority which assiduously maintained its aloofness from the masses; the masses spoke different tongues which were the so many patois hardly related to Sanskrit. The second important factor is that there is specific evidence on record that a *lingua franca* was in vogue throughout the sub-continent as far north-west as the Kabul valley, as far north as the Nepalese Tarai, as far east as the Bengal coast, as far south as the North Pennar and as far west as Saurashtra, which was intelligible to and used by the people in general with slight phonetical variations, and was written and read in a common script throughout the land to the south and east of the Sutlej, much in the same way as Hindi written in *Devanagari* is intelligible to all Indians today except when they take a stance like the Sanskrit-niṣṭha Brahmins of Aśoka Maurya's days, e.g., the Urdu protagonists, or get worked up with regional chauvinism fanned for political ends. And the third substantial factor is that of the dialects only one becomes the koine or literary norm, just as *Kharī-bolī* is the koine of Hindi language and Meridian dialect is the koine of English language, and grammar follows, and does not precede, the language. The people's language is represented by the Asokan edicts and the numerous records of the Sātavāhanas, Śuṅgas and Kāliṅgas, as also of the Greeks, Śakas and Kushāṇas, up to the 2nd century AD. What has come down to us as the Prakrit literature, be it *Pāli* of the Buddhists, *Mahārāṣṭrī* and *Śaurasenī* as well as *Ardha-Māgadhī* of the Jains, or *Māgadhī*, *Mahārāṣṭrī*, *Śaurasenī* and *Paiśācī* Prakrit of the Sanskrit dramatists, at the time of its reduction the literary form had already been fossilized and if not never, it seldom represented the

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popular medium. Although Vararuci, who wrote *Vārtikas* on Pāṇini and lived probably in the 5th century A.D., is the first to give a grammar for Prakrit, and Bhāmaha (assigned to the 7th century A.D.) wrote commentary on it, the most important of the Prakrit grammars is the chapter VIII of the *Siddha-Hemacandra* of Hemacandra Sūri (1088-1172 A.D.); and interestingly all these grammarians were Sanskritists who added only a chapter on Prakrit in their work on Sanskrit grammar. This can explain that the literary Prakrit as extant now was systematized, and the works were possibly cleansed of colloquialisms by the learned pandits to bring them in tune with the grammatical codes and at par with the language of the *śiṣṭa* (urbanised, in essence, an adept in the use of chaste Sanskrit) of the day.

The language used by Aśoka Maurya (272 B. C.—236 B. C.) in his inscriptions provides us with a window on the language of the masses in the first millennium before Christ. According to the phonetic variations, four groups are indicated :—

1. The region to the west of the Sutlej, falling within the Viceroyalty of Takṣaśilā, and represented by the Rock Edicts at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra. Besides the Indian language written in the *Kharoṣṭhī* script, the Greek and Aramaic languages written in their respective scripts were also in use, mostly beyond the Khyber and Bolan passes.

2. The region to the east and south of the Sutlej, covering the entire Gangetic basin, with centre at Pāṭaliputra, and represented by the Rock Edicts at Kalsi, Dhauli and Jaugad, Pillar Edicts in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and the Minor Rock and Pillar Edicts in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar,—all written in Prakrit but in the *Brāhmī* script.

3. The region controlled by the Viceroyalty of Ujjayinī, and represented by the Rock Edicts at Girnar and Sopara, written in Prakrit in the *Brāhmī* script.

4. The region controlled by the Viceroyalty at Suvarṇagiri and represented by the Edicts in Andhra Pradesh and Karnatak Pradesh, written in Prakrit in the *Brāhmī* script.

The same form of language and script continues for about 500 years after Aśoka when it was supplanted by panegyrics and eulogies in classical

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Sanskrit of the *kāvya* style. The earliest of the inscriptions in Sanskrit is the Sudarśana Lake Inscription of Rudradāman dated in 150 A. D. and the most important of the lucid panegyrics (*praśasti*) is that of Hariṣeṇa composed for Samudragupta and inscribed on the Asokan pillar at Allahabad in c. 360 A. D. Incidentally, both the above records are preserved on the same site which contain Aśoka's records. Earlier to Rudradāman's record in Sanskrit are only three pieces: one is a small inscription of one Dhana claiming to be sixth in descent from Pushyamitra who had performed two Horse-Sacrifices, and is from Ayodhya; the other two are known as the Ghoshundi and Hathiwara grants and their provenance is near Jaipur; they cannot be pushed beyond the beginning of the Christian era. It is curious to note that despite the projected zeal of the Śuṅgas for the revival of Brahmanical ritualism and reinstatement of Sanskrit scholarship, all the Śuṅga records known so far are in Prakrit, and a Greek, Heliodorus by name, who consecrated a *Garuḍadhvaja* to propitiate Viṣṇu in the kingdom of Sung Bhāgabhadra at Vidiśā, possibly the capital, also made his record in Prakrit in the *Brāhmī* script. The best narrative record from the historical point of view is that of Khāravela who got it recorded in 172 B. C. on the Hāthigumphā on the Udayagiri near Bhubaneswar in Orissa in Prakrit in the *Brāhmī* script, continuing the tradition of the Mauryan administration. This tradition was also continued by the Sātavāhanas in the Narmada-Godavari valley, whence they carried it down to Kāñci where they created the *Tondimandalam* and founded the Pallava kingdom with Prakrit as the court language. The dynasty of Khāravela and the dynasty of the Sātavāhanas or Āndhra-bhṛtyas were founded by the servants, possibly of the Mahāmātra rank, of the Maurya Empire.

Just as inscriptions in Sanskrit were rare before 150 A. D., so were inscriptions in Prakrit rare after the Gupta period, say 500 A. D. onwards. A notable example is provided by the record of Kakkuka, found near Ghatayala in Jodhpur district, dated in Samvat 918 (861 A. D.). It is in *kāvya* style, composed in chaste Jain Mahārāṣṭrī, and contains 23 verses, recording the founding of a Jain temple, establishing of a market and erecting of two pillars, and *inter alia*, mentions the curious fact that he had descended from a Brahmin father and Kshatriya mother.

The Jains and the Buddhists maintain that Mahāvīra and the

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Buddha had preached in the people's language. Among the Jains, the Śvetāmbara *Āgamas* are in *Ardha-Māgadhi* and the Digambara early works in Jaina *Śauraseni*. The Theravāda Buddhist canon is in Pāli. The area of both of them was the same, namely, eastern Uttar Pradesh and north and central Bihar. Therefore the language of the two teachers ought to be the same because they wandered among the same people. But then why this divergence is there, has been a baffling question.

A key to this riddle is provided by the language of the Asokan edicts, especially his Calcutta-Bairat inscription where he quotes certain passages from the Scripture. It postulates that there must have been some collection from which he drew upon and it was possibly in the *Māgadhi* as spoken in that region (Region no. 2 above). The discovery of Aśvaghōṣa's plays in Khotan further indicated that they were in a Prakrit not akin to Pāli, and hence it would not be pertinent to suppose that the Buddha spoke Pāli. Woolner notes, "Pāli originally meaning a 'boundary, limit, or line' was applied to the Canon of the Hinayāna Buddhists. Thence it is used of the language of that Canon, found also in some canonical books : all being preserved in what were originally the missionary churches of Ceylon, Burma and Siam". He also notes that Pāli is not *Māgadhi*. It has been supposed that it might be the language of Ujjain whence Mahinda took the sacred Canon to Ceylon, or it might be the language of the Kālīṅga country because of certain resemblances with the language of Khāravēla's record, or it might be from some place near the Vindhya because of some points of resemblance with Pāṣāci, or it might be an old form of *Śauraseni*. Woolner concludes, "Whatever may be the exact truth of the matter, it is clear that Pāli contains several different strands in its composition and that it varies also according to its age. The oldest type is seen in the Gāthās, then come the prose portions of the Canon followed by non-canonical literature and finally still later layers. The development of Pāli has been influenced by Sanskrit".

Similarly as the Brahmins detested the *Vrātyas* who did not owe allegiance to the Vedic fire-cult and the Brahmanic social and religious organisation and called the *Prācya*s or Easterners as being *āsuriya* or demoniac, i. e., barbarian and hostile in nature, so the *Prācya Vrātya* thinkers boycotted Sanskrit and discarded the Brahmanic concept of

social discrimination. The Buddha accordingly bade his followers to learn his teachings in their own language, and thus the ground was prepared where the original teachings could be redacted in different dialects.

The Theravāda Canon was reduced to writing in the 1st Century B. C. Winternitz aptly notes that “the monks of Ceylon were bent on preserving and passing on the texts written in the language once established for them in India. In all probability these monks were just as conscientious regarding the contents as regarding the language, and preserved and handed down to us the texts of the Tipitaka which was written down in the Pāli language, with rare fidelity during the last two thousand years.”

The reduction of the Jain Canon followed a more devious route. There is a consistent tradition that there was a twelve-year famine in Magadha about 150 years after the *nirvāṇa* of Mahāvira when a portion of the *Samgha* migrated to South India under the leadership of Bhadrabāhu I, the last of the *Śruta-kevalins*. After the famine a Council was convened by the members of the *Samgha* who had stayed behind in the North, for the restoration of the sacred canon, as so many monks, who were the repositories of the sacred lore, had been dead. The representatives from the South did not join it, nor they accepted the Canon so compiled by the ascetics of the north who had become slack in ascetic practices to some extent due to the exigencies of famine. Thus followed the Schism as the Digambaras and the Śvetāmbaras. The Śvetāmbaras finally redacted the Canon as preserved with them under Devardhigaṇi at Vallabhī in M. E. 983 (456 A. D.). In course of time, as it passed through word of mouth it was affected by the regional dialects to some extent, but, in essence, retained an archaic character in language. This was termed as *Ardha-Māgadhi*. It appears to be the *Māgadhi* which was largely influenced by *Śauraseni*. The *Samgha* that travelled to South India, redacted their pro-canonical literature in the Prakrit that they had brought with them. A. N. Upadhye calls it *Jaina Śauraseni*. He has traced common verses in the South Indian Digambara pro-canonical literature and the Śvetāmbara *Ardha-Māgadhi Agama* literature, and has concluded that it proves their common heritage. The redaction of the Digambara literature started with Kundakunda who succeeded to

the pontificate in 8 B. C. He wrote in Prakrit (*Jaina Śauraseni*) 84 Pāhuḍas and he is also credited with the composition of Thirukural in Tamil. The Śvetāmbaras took to writing some 450 years after Kunda-kunda. Their centre had shifted from Magadha to Ujjayinī, and later on to Vallabhī, which factor contributed to their taking to *Mahārāṣṭrī* Prakrit for their pro-canonical literature. As distinct from the literary Prakrit used in Sanskrit dramas, the *Mahārāṣṭrī* Prakrit was the *lingua franca* of the region and was used as vehicle for their compositions by the Svetāmbara Jains particularly, it came to be identified as the *Jaina Mahārāṣṭrī*. The material point to be noted here is that as the Pāli survived in a form in which it reached Ceylon, so the *Ardha-Māgadhī*, *Jaina Śauraseni* and *Jaina Mahārāṣṭrī* survived in a form in which they were once adopted by the two sects of the Jains, and this survival was possible for two reasons—one was the seclusion and removal from the centre of their origin, and the other was the sanctity imposed on the Scripture as *Arṣa* hence not subject to interference *prima facie*.

It is inferred from the Hāthigumphā Inscription of Khāravela of Kalinga that a Council of monks for the recitation of the Canon was convened 355 years after Mahāvira's nirvāṇa, i. e., in 172 B. C. There is no mention of this Council either in the Śvetāmbara or in the Digambara literature. There is a possibility that an attempt was then made to reconcile the Schism, or it might have been simply a congregation of the Digambara *munis*, but nothing definite can be said.

The foregoing discussion postulates a review of our approach to the study of Prakrit languages and to tracing the linguistic developments in India in an objective manner, taking Prakrit as *prakṛta* (natural, raw) and Sanskrit as *saṃkṛta* (modified, refined) mode of expression, and basing it on the Indian scene first of all.

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