

Sanskrit and Regional Languages

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I

India is a land of many languages. According to the official sources, India has 122 major languages and 1599 other languages. Of them 30 languages are spoken by more than million people and 122 by more than 10000 speakers. Our constitution has accepted Hindi and English as official languages and 22 as scheduled languages. Sanskrit is recognized as a classical language along with Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Odisha. Every language is enriched with her own literature, theatre and culture. Any study of language cannot ignore this plurality of languages and their different phases of development.

We get the earliest specimen of language in the Vedic Sanskrit. The Vedic people stayed in the river-basins of the Indus and Ganges. The earliest hymns of Rgvēda are in the Vedic-tongue. Ordinary people used more simple dialects for communication. Panini prescribed a grammar for language and culled out a refined and sophisticated form -Sanskrit. The nānālokā continued to use their own simple dialects for expression.

Mutual contact with people outside like *Kushan, Bactrian, Greeks, Scythians* and *Parthians* might have influenced the local dialects. By the time of the first centuries of the Common Era regional peculiarities began to develop giving distinct identities to the tongues spoken in different regions. This is the age of prākṛts. The word prākṛt means original, natural, normal, ordinary, vernacular etc. in contrast to the sophisticated Sanskrit used by the elite. All the tongues other than the highly refined Sanskrit came to be designated as prākṛts.

Budha spoke to his followers in their language-*Pali*. Mahavira also used the *prākrt* for promotion of his religion.

The most popular *prākrt*s were the following:

Ardhamāgadhi: The language of people in Magadha, Bihar. This language is spoken between 600 BCE to 100 CE. Vardhmana Mahavir a gave sermons in *Ardhamāgadhi*. His teachings were transmitted oral tradition.

Šaursemi: Šaursemi was spoken at Shoorsen (Mathura) region of North Indian between 100 BCE to 500 CE.

Digamber Jains wrote their Philosophical literature in *Šaursemi* language.

In the Sanskrit dramas of Bhāsa, Kalidāsa etc. Šaursemi is used for dialogues of servants, jokers, labourers etc.

Jain Maharāṣṭri: was the language of non-*agamic* Jain literature. Biographies of *Tīrthankarās* and parables were written in this language.

This was the language used for Jain epics and songs. Modern Marathi language is the next step-language in the evolution of Maharāṣṭri.

Apbhramśa: The meaning of *Apbhramśa* is 'de-generated' or 'impure'. *Apbhramśa* is not a single language but there are many *Apbhramśa* languages which were born from various *prākrt* languages. *Apbhramśa* languages were spoken between 500 CE to 1000 CE. There is lot of Jain literature written in *Apbhramśa* languages in the medieval period.

Some rulers, mainly tribal, patronized the *prākrt*s *apbhramśās*. The earliest extant use of *Prākritis* is seen in the inscriptions of Emperor Asoka (268-232 BCE). *Gāthasaptaśati*, a collection of 700 ballads was composed in the *Prākrita*

language; *Guṇāndhya's* comprehensive work of stories, *Brihatkatha*, was written in the *Paiśāci* Prakrt of *Maharāṣṭri*. Many verses quoted by Anandavardhana (9.c CE) to illustrate *dhvani* were the sweet verses composed in *prākṛts*. This shows that the popular tongue had gained recognition in the scholastic circles by that time.

Bharata was quite familiar with the linguistic diversity of his time. He treats languages at three levels – *Āryabhāṣa*, *Prākṛts* and *Vibhāṣa*. He considers Sanskrit as *Āryabhāṣa* to be spoken by the noble; *Māgadhi*, *Āvantiya*, *Prāçya*, *Sauraseni*, *Ardhamāgadhi Vāhika* etc. are regional *prākṛts*. Languages used by the tribal people come under *Vibhāṣa*.

The three important *prākṛts* used in Sanskrit dramas are *sauraseni*, *Magadhi* and *Maharāṣṭri*. *Praçya*, *Bahlīki*, *Dakṣiṇātya*, *Sakari*, *Sabari*, *Ābhīri*, *Dramili* *prākṛts* are also used occasionally. The status of the character in the hierarchy determines the *prākṛt* he/she has to use. For example *Dramili* was the language of tribals, *Sauraseni* was spoken by the heroine and her friends. *Avanti* was spoken by the cheat and rogues.

The most interesting thing is that when the hero speaks Sanskrit, it is intelligible to the heroine. She speaks *prākṛts* which the hero very well understands. There were different languages, people choose the language that suited to their status; but everybody around understood the conversation.

By the end of the first millennium the regional *prākṛts*/apbramśās which were till then subordinates of Sanskrit emerged as independent entities. Thus, all the North Indian languages attained the status of separate regional languages. Although it is not possible to know exactly when the modern languages like Hindi, Marathi etc. emerged most of the scholars date the emergence to around 1000 CE.

Emergence of these new languages was a turning point in the literary, theatrical and cultural history of India. The new languages enriched themselves borrowing the literary treasures of Sanskrit by way of translations and adaptations. During this period, the two itihāsās, works of Kalidasa, Manusmṛti, Arthaśāstra etc. were re-born in all the new languages in some form, either fully or partially. But Sanskrit language as such, was kept at a distance. The presence of Sanskrit thereafter became *invisibly visible* in the regional languages.

This means that the India of the second millennium was not the India of the first millennium. Sanskrit theatre emerged in the centuries prior to the Common Era and flourished during the first millennium. All through its life Sanskrit interacted with urban courtly life and kept a reasonable distance from the masses. The performances were made in urban royal centers as part of some festivals. Great dramatists like Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sodraka, Visakhadatta and Bhavabhūti enthralled the elite with their sophisticated plays. But we do not get another Bhasa or Bhavabhuti in the second millennium.

Given below is a rough sketch of the development of modern languages from the *root - prākṛits, apbramśā*. Languages in the North evolved separately from the languages of South India.

North Indian Languages

Assamese	Bengali	Bodo Dogri,	
Gujarati	Hindi	Kashmiri	Konkani,
Maithili,	Magahi	Mahal	Nepali,
Oriya	Panjabi	Saraiki	Sindhi,
Simhala	Urdu	Angika	Bhojpuri,
Dhivehi	Kumaoni		

South Indian Languages:

Brahui	Jeseri	Kannada	Malayalam
Tamil	Telugu	Tulu	

Reflecting the world outside the characters in Sanskrit drama were classified as noble(*uttama*), medium (*madhyama*) and low(*adhama*). Only the characters belonging to the first category used Sanskrit. All the others including women, spoke different *prākṛits* that were popular in the respective region. It will be

interesting to sort out the Sanskrit part from the *prākṛts* used in a play. In almost all the plays, Sanskrit part will be less than 50% of the total linguistic expressions. Someone has remarked, quite mischievously, that the term Sanskrit drama applied to *Śakuntaḷa*, *Mr̥cchakaṭika* and others, itself is a misnomer!

II

These details give us a general notion about the linguistic pluralism, distribution of languages in the country and different phases of their development.

The South Indian languages are not derived from Sanskrit. They belong to a different family and have a different source. Yet Sanskrit has influenced them in one way or the other.

Tamil, declared a classical language is the oldest in the group. The Dravidian Politics in Tamilnadu is not in favour of Sanskrit. It views both Hindi and Sanskrit as tools for the imposition of North Indian Supremacy, Sanskrit is considered to be a symbol of North Indian hegemony.

Kerala has a different notion. Malayalam is, perhaps, the one South Indian language most influenced by Sanskrit. She has even sacrificed her inherited Dravidian alphabet in favour of Sanskrit.

Every aspect of Sanskrit culture has influenced Kerala.

She preserved the Bhasa plays, the Natyasastra mode of acting as Kutiyattam and Abhinavagupta's commentary on Natya Sastra. The earliest translation of Kautilya's Arthasastra in any regional language is perhaps, the Bhashakantaliyam of 14 C. CE. Kerala is the only state where the Prakris are still alive. Our actors render them in their sweet melody.

The method of interaction of regional languages with Sanskrit vary from state to state. Taking the case of Malayalam, she had intimate relation with Sanskrit. The interaction between the two can be studied under three heads.

1. The popular tradition of Sanskrit Studies :

There were two distinct streams in the study of Sanskrit in Kerala. One was the popular tradition and the other, of the elite.

Many scholars believe that the first entry of North Indian languages to Kerala was through the Prakrts promoted by Asoka of the Mayuryan empire as part of his mission of propagating Buddhism. There were many Viharas of the Budhists in Kerala. They were known as Palli in the local language. Every Palli had a Pallikootam attached to it for the study of Sanskrit. The teachers were designated as 'asan', corrupt form of Sanskrit acharya. Entry here was open to all. The focus was on teaching Ayurveda, ganita, vastu etc. which enabled the students to earn a livelihood. When the viharas declined the classes continued in household Kutippallikutam. This uninterrupted stream of learning extended to the early decades of the last century when they were substituted by formal schools. There were many renowned scholars in this long chain of schools are gurukulam. The most distinguished were Itty Achyutan and Sri Narayanaguru. The stream had primary centre spread all over the village and gurukulams of their own. Most of the beneficiaries were the marginalised, backward and untouchables of the society. The existence of this subaltern stream of learning Sanskrit is not known to scholars outside Kerala. The other stream, the sala's attached the temples restricted admission to upper caste students. Instruction there focused on the theoretical part like Mimamsa, Vedanta etc. The details are well known. Thus Kerala could produce the

great Sankaracharya and the renowned Sree Narayana Guru both learning Vedanta, one to proclaim the supreme bliss and the other to eradicate untouchability. This is the wonder that is Kerala.

2. Another layer of Sanskrit learning visible in Kerala is in the field of intellectual discourses. We have Sastra Sadas in the centres of Sanskrit learning. The deliberations on various aspects of Sastras are held in the medium of Sanskrit. Participation is limited to few scholars. But we have a parallel form of Vakyarthavichara called marathukali in the Northern parts of the state. The medium is Malayalam and thousands of people participate in the deliberations.
3. Another payer of Sanskrit learning in Kerala is visible in the Pattambi experience. Punnasseri Nambi started the Sanskrit college in the first decades of the last century declaring that ‘Saraswathi knows no untouchability’. He admitted students from all castes and faiths to his institution. Muslim, Christians and students from upper caste and untouchables learned Sanskrit his college. Actually Nambi laid the foundation of modern studies of Sanskrit to in Kerala.

You will, perhaps, be surprised to learn that a Christian student of Punnasseri, Kuriyakkoo Master whom people fondly called Samkritapranayabhajanam founded the Sanskrit College at Pavaratti which has now grown to the prestigious Guruvayoor Kendriya Vidyapeeda. Out of his mad love for Sanskrit he contributed the campus to the Govt. of India which now values several crores of rupees.

Sanskrit studies in Kerala especially in the school level faces several challenges. Sanskrit is the victim of three-language formula in the schools.

Students there has to study Sanskrit as the fourth language or substute it for mother-tongue which many parents are not willing to do. We have to evolve an alternate strategy for Sanskrit studies in non- Hindi states.

Thank you.