

II-10. Prakrit: The Languages of People

When you think of alphabets, that are asked to bear all the human investigations and all the aspirations and appetites that we have and that have ever existed in human history - it is terribly abstract.

- **Alan Gurganus**

It is an old and consistent tradition with us to be concerned with the words we use and their purification. Concepts are attached to structures of activities external to mind. All languages are full of images and metaphors whose origin is being lost together with the art from which they are created.

- **Robert Openheimer**

Arihant used the local languages of the Ganga Valley. Virtually all ancient literature related to this tradition is in **Prakrit**. The Buddhist works are in **Pali**. These languages of common people are called Prakrit (*prak* = from before or perpetuity, *krit* = created or represented). As a natural language of people the emphasis of Prakrits was on the content and dynamics of the thought process elicited by the experience of social existence. Many of the current linguistic dialects of India also trace their origins to the Prakrit languages, also derogatorily called *apabhraṃśh* or corrupted. The ancient languages of South India have some affinity with Prakrit. However the Dravidian scripts are significantly different than the Mauryan Brahmi script that later evolved into the Nagari script used by the languages of North India [For the evolution of script and writing technologies see Singh, 1991; Sircar, 1965]. Renewed effort to understand surviving versions of Prakrit and its current artifacts is necessary to understand the linguistic heritage of India.

The social context of Sanskrit (*sans* = purified, *krit* = form) is reflected in its word roots. It is the alien attitude of the language purists that is also apparent in the Sanskrit plays where the Prakrit speaking natives are treated derogatorily. Such attitudes of language technicians and purists show up in virtually all cultures. They ignore the fact that evolution of language is a democratic process where all forces contribute innovations. Forces of colonization in transfer of thought through language inevitably corrupt the training, expectations and world-views of the novice and scholars alike to control thought and mind.

Purification of Vedic Sanskrit by Panini

Aryan herders were illiterate. Vedic Sanskrit, the language of their hymns and chants, possibly originated somewhere North and West of Indus Valley. The content of the orally transmitted Vedang came under scrutiny as it became clear that the meaning of the orally transmitted words was open to interpretation. Panini (ca 400 BCE) of Takshsila in the Gandhar (modern Kandhahar) valley of Afghanistan made the first serious attempt to codify, structure, and formalize the relations between the phonemes. These rules were used to establish the linguistically uniform Vedic texts written down some time after 100 BCE. Panini's rules for the formation and evolution of words apply to virtually all Indo European languages. However, etymology, phonemes and word usage is about the origins (roots, derivatives) of commonly used word and not about the precision of usage to communicate meaning and reasoning. There may be some truth to the assertion that Sanskrit is as rigorous as a computer language: Both are useful for transfer and storage of information. However Sanskrit certainly fails to communicate the syntax, meaning, reasoning, and thought. Perhaps these were not required in the context of the

Vedic words which are said to be of non-human origins and were considered to be beyond human comprehension. In other words, the god-given poetic form did not need human intervention. Such attitudes made these works inaccessible to general public, and stifled communication of ideas to promote social stratification. It suited the ritual purposes where memorized scriptures impress the believers who are not supposed to understand the content anyway.

Panini's use of the word *Sanskrit* is traditionally interpreted as the purification of milk into yogurt (curd). In *Ashtadhyayi* he outlined about 4000 rules that show that 14 phonemes evolve into wide ranging words which are refined with use. Panini outlined 39 forms of conjugations to communicate meanings associated with words. Syntax is rarely identified in Sanskrit works. Another key insight of Panini is that distinguishable phonemes are created by the movement of tongue in conjunction with the vocal cord resonates by air pressure from abdomen (*a*), lung (*ī*), lower respiratory apparatus (*e*), upper respiratory apparatus (*o, ou*), and nasal cavity (*am*). Thus ***Aaauummmn*** uses and exercises all the resonating chambers. Modern speech therapists use sentences like "I ate an orange" to obtain insight into abnormalities of the respiratory apparatus, and also to exercise it.

Patanjali (ca. 300 BCE) in *Mahabhasya* elaborated the role of oral communication in elaboration of the intention, ideas, reasoning, thought and contemplation. It was also realized that codified rules for word communication are also needed for discourse. Through such efforts the form of the Sanskrit grammar that we know now evolved around 500 CE. However as a language oral Sanskrit was rarely used beyond the discourses and debates. Jain scholars adopted Sanskrit to communicate with

others. However for their own purposes they continued to use the local Prakrits that evolved over the centuries into many dialects and languages of India.

The poetic form of written Sanskrit text remained mired in multiple meanings communicated by phonetic roots and conjugations of words. Concerns of Sanskrit grammar also did not go beyond formal and overt structure of simple word associations. Even at its peak use (ca. 500 CE) Sanskrit writer paid little attention to clause, sentence, and paragraph structures. Such devices of context and syntax are required to communicate the meaning and content of complex thought. Without such nuances the Sanskrit works are often subject to endless interpretations. It may have rhetoric value, but it prevents reasoning to access and manipulate the thought. My experience is that even the best of the Sanskrit writing is that the interpretation is a matter for endless debates. Possibly for such reasons the Sanskrit works have emerged as vehicle to elaborate the imagined worlds, as in the Vedang and Upanishadic conceptions of the 'eternal' and 'omniscient' as the 'cause' of everything including the universe. Such limitations are also obvious in early (ca. 200 BCE) works like *Mahabharat*, *Gita*, *Ramayana* and other compilations (*samhita*) on medicine, rules of behaviors, and sexual etiquettes (*Kam-sutra*).

The later phase (after 400 CE) of Sanskrit literature is in the form of scholarly commentaries and elaborations (Bhasya) of the earlier ideas. The last phase (after 1000 CE) the Sanskrit literature is devotional. Another trend is towards rhetorical reaction to counteract competing ideas that may loosen their hold on the power. Not surprisingly, with such emphases a tradition of thought communication and scrutiny did not evolve. Sanskrit emerged as the language of choice for the memorized scriptures recited by the priestly class. For such purposes it matters little if

the content remained inaccessible to most of the population, including the priest. Their belief in preordained omniscience also discouraged tinkering with the content and thought. Recitations in Sanskrit are still used to dispense religious and ritualistic rules for a fee. It is in the tradition of the legitimization of the power and actions of kings by Vedic rituals are the subject of eulogies and inscriptions in Sanskrit. A close relationship of the proponents of Sanskrit with the centers of power is unmistakable.

Scholarly studies in alien languages suffer from the limitation that they do not go beyond prescribed limits. In this sense use of Sanskrit has much in common with the use of two other colonial languages in India, i.e. Persian and English: Proficiency in the official languages facilitated upward mobility. The East India Company developed a close relationship with the Brahmin Pandits as the court interpreters of the social practices. It also suited the purpose of British Raj that built on a similarity of the Indian caste structure with the British class structure.

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A secondary role of Sanskrit is also apparent in the evolution of the Nagari script. At least until 300 BCE *Brahmi* script was used to write in the Prakrit languages. Brahmi is the precursor of the modern Nagari script. The first known Sanskrit written work is apparently an inscription in Brahmi from 150 CE by Rudradaman to repair a dam from 250 BCE. It is on the same rock that also contains a set of major stone inscriptions of Ashok (ca. 250 BCE) in Brahmi script. Over the next 1500 years Brahmi evolved into Nagari script. The current version has been in use since 1100 CE. Variations of the Nagari script, possibly of the non-Aryan origin, are now used by all but four of the major languages of South India.

Humorous is not necessarily comical.

Humorous goes to the heart of the observed whereas the comical touches the observer. As an example of Sanskrit humor consider two of the interpretations of the name Akchapad, the compiler of Gautam's Nyay Sutr. According to the legend in Nyay-Kosh the sage was so deeply involved in contemplation that he fell into a well. After being rescued, God of learning mercifully provided him with a second pair of "eyes on feet" (the literal translation of the word akch-pad). It is an allegory for keeping arguments grounded in reality in the sense of *watch where you are going*. According to another legend Vyas, known for his Mahabharat and Vedant Sutr narratives vilified Nyay. However, he condescended by looking at it not through his natural eyes, but with a new pair of eyes on his feet. Another interpretation is given in the Nay section of this site.

Language rigidity comes at a cost. Conventions are necessary for effective communication. Yet rigid rules stifle creativity, humor, and all such explorations of mind that require flexibility to challenge thought boundaries. Innate playfulness is a key element of creativity. Redundancy is necessary to capture differing experiences of the narrator as well as the audience. In the end, it is the audience that moves forward the argument and turn words into practice. For such reasons the Jain monks have always preferred to communicate in the local languages and vernaculars.

The non-evolutionary and stoic elements built into Sanskrit usage stifle flow of ideas and humor. Subtleties of experience intrinsic in traditions are lost in artificial and alien languages and modes of expression. Redundancy and the context dependent meanings that explore the word boundaries and

concept space are critically important part of understanding the origins and significance of the thought content of vocalizations and utterances. It comes from the flexibility of the language usage in a given environment. Such limitations also follow in the use of Hindi. In fact, most of the regional languages of India with ancient Prakrit roots have a richer tradition of humor than Hindi.

Humor from Indian politicians

An ancient wisdom goes: *Do not get caught up in your own image.* Such modalities (irony, humor, satire) represent the universal as a clown or trickster. Voltaire articulated the theme: *God is playing comedian to people who are too afraid to laugh.* It is the way to cherish, yearn, and appreciate through the opposites of evil and good.

Indian politicians faced such an opposite in dealings with British stiff upper lip. Asked once what he thought of Western civilization, Mahatma Gandhi replied, "It would be a good idea." A few years later, upbraided for going to Buckingham Palace in London in his loincloth for an audience with the King-Emperor, Gandhi retorted, "His Majesty had on enough clothes for the both of us."

Contrary to perceptions otherwise, democracy has not flourished in any of the ex-British colonies. They said one thing and did something else

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Reacting with undisguised culture shock on his discovery of America, after his trip in 1949 Jawaharlal Nehru said "One should never visit America for the first time."

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Indira Gandhi once remarked: "In India, our private enterprise is usually more private than enterprising." In answer to

an American journalist in 1971 about why she had refused to meet with Pakistan's General Yahya Khan: "You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist."

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V.K. Krishna Menon once retorted when complimented by a well-meaning Englishwoman on the quality of his English. "Of course my English is better than yours. You merely picked it up. I learned it."

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Poet Sarojini Naidu made a classic comment about the Mahatma Gandhi's frugal lifestyle and his army of aides: "If only he knew how much it costs us to keep him in poverty."

Some things can not be translated without understanding.

Significance of one such word *itthi* is developed in the next chapter. A major problem for translation lies in the fact that the concepts are often rooted in the culture and usage. It is not uncommon to miss-the-point, don't-get-it, can't-say-it. The feeling is more intense for the pithy concepts that may be literally translated but not suitably articulated. These are necessary concerns to get in to the mind of the person who you are trying to understand. It is of particular interest here that many of the pithy words from Prakrit, as well as the present regional languages of all over the planet, have not found their equivalent in modern languages. To some extent English has the advantage of evolving in broader cultural, social and geographical contexts over the last 400 years.

Some Concept words from Prakrit are Worth Dwelling Upon

Ahar: Ability to internalize (not just food) and make use of the nourishment.

Anugam: Analytical contemplation to understand the significance of organized and categorized reality.

Atm: Individual self. This Jain concept is not the same as the Hindu terms for *Atma* (soul) or *Brahm Atman* (the universal soul).

Avali: Turn, succession, cycle, period

Dhamm: or Dharm is roughly translated as the *truth for existence* or *attribute of extant reality*. It is not the teaching or the code of conduct in the sense of religion.

Itthi: Perception (II-11) that guides awareness of the sense inputs to respond in the context of prior experience.

Karm: Action (not often mis-interpreted as fate).

Karman kay: The action-form; the form that remains as a result of actions (even in the absence of the physical form). **Lessa:** Motive

Mrasha: Wishful, wistful (not necessarily a lie) See III-13.

Namo: Acknowledgement of the precedence

Nann: Ability to know (as in comprehend and cognize) the various types of inputs (#A115). It has been misinterpreted in Sanskrit as *gyan* (knowledge or information), which is also inconsistent with the interpretation of *itthi* as *gyan* (II-11).

Pajatta: Criteria for sustainable existence of a category

Sacch: Truthful utterance (not the logical truth)

Sat: Reality (necessarily a truth rooted in the represented reality)

Sia: Un-decidable based on the available information and criteria. This is the conceptual origin of Syad logic.

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