

Language of Sanskrit Drama

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सरोजा भाटे महाभागा संस्कृतरूपकेषु प्राकृतानां प्रयोगवैचित्र्यस्य कारणानि प्रयोजनञ्च अन्विष्यन्ती भरतनाट्यशास्त्रे एतद्विषयकविधीनां विश्लेषणं विधाय, सामाजिक-राजकीय-दृष्ट्या वरत्वावरत्वप्रयुक्ततया प्राकृतभाषाप्रयोगे वैविध्यं नाट्यशास्त्रसम्मतं व्याख्याय, वास्तविकरूपेण मृच्छकटिक-अभिज्ञान-शाकुन्तलादिरूपकेषु प्रयुक्तानां प्राकृतभाषाप्रयोगाणामनुशीलने तु तत्तादृश-नियमानामपरिपालनं विभाव्य महाकाव्येभ्यः वैलक्षण्यसम्पादनं वैचित्र्याधानद्वारा सौन्दर्यपरिपोषणं क्वचित् सामाजिक राजकीयाभिज्ञानपेक्षया अतिरिक्तमेव किञ्चित् असाधारणम् अभिज्ञानदानं प्रयोजनं भवितुमर्हतीति निगमयति।

An attempt is made here to present a brief account of the language of Sanskrit drama particularly with reference to aspects of identity related to them.

Theorists of Sanskrit literature recommend three idioms of poetry: Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramṣā. We are, for the present, concerned with the first two since they constitute classical dramatic literature of India. Scholars both, traditional as well as modern, record different opinions about the relationship between these two. I follow the generally accepted view. Sanskrit is the name given to an ancient vernacular, which was "refined", "rendered fit", while the word Prakrit stands for a group of vernaculars initially spoken by different communities settled in different parts of ancient India which were later systematically formalized by grammarians and developed into literary idioms. In the beginning Sanskrit and some Prākṛits were very much similar in form, almost like twin sisters. They deviated from each other in the course of time. Sanskrit was tied down by rules of grammar and became almost a fixed language, while Prākṛits were still freely breathing. India is blessed with a rich collection of literature both in Sanskrit and Prakrit. Drama is the only genre of classical Indian literature which is a multilingual composition. Dr. T.N. Dave refers to the view of A. Weber¹ who accounts for this multilinguality as "due to the existence of high degree of

1. Dave : 101

social stratification existing in Indian society of the time when dramatic literature came into existence in India". Multilinguality is, in fact, not unusual. Woolner tell us that even in western dramatic tradition different dialects are found to be used. However, according to him, unlike in Western drama, in Indian classical drama different dialects are used in the same household and they are perfectly understood by each other.¹ Again, this is not unusual in India. Woolner further quotes Grierson as saying, "In India there is nothing extraordinary in such a polyglot medley. It is paralleled by the conditions of any large house in Bengal at the present day, in which there are people from every part of India each of whom speaks his own language and is understood by others, though none of them attempts to speak what is not his mothertongue."²

Does this hold true of Sanskrit drama throughout its history? Does the existence of almost all texts of Sanskrit drama containing multiplicity of Prākṛits imply multilingual audience? Do these dramatic idioms reflect social history of India particularly with reference to social identities? These are some of the questions which deserve to be addressed. But first, a brief survey of Sanskrit drama, both in theory and practice, as far as its language is concerned.

Nāṭyaśāstra, the foremost treatise on dramaturgy in Sanskrit presents a wide spectrum of dramatic idioms covering the whole world beginning with non-human beings and ending with divine beings. Bharata speaks of *atibhāṣā*- language of gods, *āryabhāṣā*- language of noble beings, *jātibhāṣā*- language of different social strata and *yonyantari bhāṣā*- language of beings belonging to other living species.³ He further describes seven *deśabhāṣās*, regional languages, as Śaurasenī, Māgadhī, Avantikā, Prācyā, Ardhamāgadhī, Bāhikā, and Dākṣiṇātyā.⁴ All these names show the regional basis of this classification. Bharata further distinguishes different phonetic features typical of regions. Here we have, therefore, an instance of linguistic identity based on

1. Woolner : 22

2. Ibid. 88

3. Nāṭyaśāstra, 17.26-29

4. Ibid., 5.17-48

geography as well as features of pronunciation. The dramatic theory recommends the use of those dialects for the persons representing characters belonging to the respective regions. Then there is a list of seven *vibhāṣās* or dialects spoken by persons belonging to low class such as *śabaras* (mountaineers or barbarians), *ābhīras* (milkmen), *caṇḍālas* (outcastes), *vanecaras* (foresters), etc.¹ Bharata describes phonetic features of these dialects.²

The theory of drama as laid down in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* prescribes the use of Sanskrit by characters belonging to noble class (i.e. heroes who, by convention, always belong to high class), learned and educated persons and by females in exceptional circumstances.³ While on the one hand its use is restricted to characters with cultural background, on the other, it is forbidden even to noble characters devoid of education.⁴ Sanskrit is thus obviously a status symbol in the world of drama. Different *Prākṛits* are assigned to different characters. For instance, queens, harlots, heroines and their friends speak *Śaurasenī*, the servants in the harem, eunuchs, chamberlains etc. speak *Māgadhī*, *Vidūṣaka*, the buffoon or jester speaks *Prācyā* or *Avantī*, while *Ardhamāgadhī* is assigned to merchants etc.⁵ After studying this distribution of dialects over dramatic characters Dr. T.N. Dave observes, "The questions of sex, prestige, learning and social status are involved while distributing the dialects for the stage."⁶ Rajendran concludes his observations on sociolinguistic problems in *Nāṭyaśāstra* as follows: "Social hierarchy and power structure are reflected in the elaborate protocols and modes of addresses prescribed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. We have an elaborately worked out social hierarchy in Sanskrit drama.... the language used by the diverse elements of this vast social hierarchy gives us an idea of their social identity in general manners."⁷

1. Ibid., 17.49-56

2. Ibid., 17.57-61

3. Ibid., 17.31-43

4. Ibid., 17.34, 35

5. Ibid.

6. Dave : 101

7. Rajendran : 133

Although the dramatic dialects and their distribution by Bharata are shown to accord to social reality, reality is denied to the dramatic dialects themselves. Rajendran says, "We have reasons to suspect that none of the language types mentioned in the Nāṭyaśāstra is any of the genuine languages prevalent in different parts of the country".¹ According to him most of these languages may be literary versions of the actual languages. Many other scholars share this view. We will turn to this question at the end.

From theory we turn to practice and here we see that the scenario offered by the classical Indian dramatic literature spread over a period of about 15 centuries presents a variegated picture. Following facts must be noted before we proceed further:

1. Although theorists recognize three idioms for drama, Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhraṃśa, in practice, with a singular exception, Sanskrit has been the most preferred idiom.
2. With a very few exceptions Sanskrit drama has always been multilingual.
3. The Prākṛits of Sanskrit drama show, on the one hand, considerable deviations from their theoretical form, while on the other, they evince close relation with the grammarians' Prākṛits.

A brief account of the Prākṛit's appearing in Sanskrit dramatic literature is submitted here with a view to finding out whether in the first place, they elicit any kind of identity and secondly, if yes, what the nature of that identity is.

Though Bharata recommends use of several dialects and sub-dialects in Sanskrit drama, practice is confined to a few of them and a few more, not recommended by Bharata, are added. Among the available Sanskrit dramas the Mṛcchakaṭikam has the maximum number of Prākṛits (about 15) spoken by about 32 characters, while in Abhijñānaśākuntalam 31 out of 48 characters speak Prakrit.² An account of the Prākṛits in different Sanskrit dramas and their ratio with the usage of Sanskrit is presented by

1. Ibid.: 132

2. Dave : 106

scholars like K.R. Chandra and Dr. Dave. Their surveys show that by and large, 50% of the text of Sanskrit dramas appears in different Prākṛits.

Śaurasenī is the most prominent among the Prākṛits. It is originally a vernacular spoken around the region called Sūrasena (Mathura). In Sanskrit drama, both in theory and practice it is spoken by female characters, Vidūṣaka, children, astrologers etc. It occupies the first place among the dialects used in prose passages of Sanskrit plays. According to some scholars the form of classical drama was fixed in Sūrasena country and therefore it appears as a normal prose of Sanskrit drama.¹ The close similarity between Śaurasenī as it appears in its earliest form in the fragments of drama ascribed to Aśvaghōṣa and Sanskrit is due to the fact that Sanskrit evolved out of spoken Śaurasenī.² Here is an illustration of a small dialogue in Prakrit and Sanskrit from the fifth act of Abhijñānaśākuntalam:

गौतमी :- भद्रमुह किंपि वत्तुकाममिह ।

राजा :- आर्ये कथ्यताम् ।

गौतमी :- अहवा ण मे वअणावसरो अत्थि । जदो णावेखिओ गुरुअणो इयाए न तुमेणि पुच्छिआ बंधू एक्कक्कमेला चरिए भणामि किं एक्कमेक्कस्स ।।

शकुन्तला :- किं णु खु अज्जौत्तो भणादि ।

राजा :- किमिदमुपन्यस्तम् ।

Māgadhī is the dialect spoken around the region of Magadha in the East. It was the language of the Magadha Empire. Dramatic theory assigns it to characters belonging to lower class such as servants, fishermen, policemen, barbers and Jain monks. The list of characters supposed to speak in Māgadhī given by Pischel in his Prakrit grammar is reproduced by Woolner.³ It clearly shows that Māgadhī is assigned to low characters. Leuders has, after studying the dialects in Aśvaghōṣa's drama, identified the language of the *duṣṭa* (wicked) as Māgadhī.⁴ Keith's remark in this

1. Keith : 73

2. Woolner : 5

3. Ibid : 87

4. Katre : 25

context, namely, "the fact that the speaker of old Māgadhī is *duṣṭa* (wicked) reminds us of the bad character enjoined by Magadha¹ is worthnoting. C. Rajendran also cites the opinion of Madhav Deshpande that assignment of Māgadhī to low class people is "due to the loss of power by Magadha and the rise of other power centres in ancient India after the fall of the Mauryan empire."² Here we have an example of negative identity due to loss of power. Śākārī, one of the vibhāṣās assigned to Śākāras (brother-in-law of the king), black-smiths, hunters etc. is traceable to Māgadhī.³ When the character of Śākāra in *Mrcchakaṭika* recites :

एषा नाणकमूशिकामकशिकामच्छाशिका लाशिका णिण्णाशा कुलनाशिका
अवशिका कामस्स मञ्जूशिका..... etc. it appears to some scholars to be a deliberate mockery of the old Māgadhī or Ardhamāgadhī spoken by Jain monks. It is, therefore, not unlikely that language of a particular social group was subjected to travesty in literary compositions like dramas. However, it is difficult then to understand why innocent children like Rohasena and Sarvadamana are made to speak in Māgadhī.

Mahārāṣṭrī is yet another variety of Prakrit employed for songs of female characters. The heroines and their friends, for instance, speak in Śaurasenī and sing in Mahārāṣṭrī. As the name suggests, it was, originally the language spoken by people living in the region around the river Godavari and according to linguists its traces are found in old Marāṭhī. It is not known to Bharata. It makes its first appearance in Kālidāsa's dramas and is regularly used in subsequent dramas for songs. Its entry in Sanskrit drama was due to its established fame as a beautiful language most suited for lyrical songs.⁴ There are literary compositions like the anthology called *Gāhāsattasāī* entirely in Mahārāṣṭrī. Here is the wellknown song sung by Hamsapadikā in the 5th act of Śākuntalam :

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1. Keith : 74
 2. Rajendran : 131
 3. Ibid : 132
 4. Keith : 73

अहिणवमहुलोलुवो तुमं तह परिचुम्बिय चूअमज्जरीम्।
कमलवसैमेत्तनिव्वुओ महुअर वीसरियोसि णं कहम्॥

Apart from these three main Prākṛits there are many other Prākṛits found in different dramas. The *Ṙcchakaṭikam* of Śūdraka composed sometime in the beginning of the C.E. is said to closely follow the line laid down by Bharata and illustrates the use of almost all Prākṛits prescribed by Bharata through its characters. Such dialects which make sporadic appearances deserve closer study with reference to their socio-linguistic aspects. Perhaps, they belong to the category of secondary language described by Sheldon Pollock. Pollock distinguishes between primary and secondary languages of classical Indian literature ; Sanskrit, Prākṛit and Apabhraṃśa are the three primary "cosmopolitan idoms" according to him, while he describes them as secondary languages which were used for mimetic purpose in drama. They appear, says he, "in drama in direct discourse and aside from imitative use of language to provide local colour in drama."¹

Some scholars are of the opinion that Prākṛit utilized by Aśvaghōṣa, Bhāsa, Kālidāsa and Śūdraka must have been drawn from current mediums in those days. Other scholars of Prākṛit languages are of the view that Prākṛits were formalized as literary languages already at the time of Kālidāsa and "the ground for more extended use of dialects may be attributed to literary purpose rather than to any attempt to imitate the speech of the day."²

This brings us to another important issue, raised in the beginning, namely, adaptability of the audience to the multilingual performance involving frequent code switching. To what extent were the Prākṛits understood by the audience in the past who watched the performance of, for instance, *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* or *Ṙcchakaṭikam*? A clue to the upper limit is offered by Keith who tells us that as early as in A.D. 900 Rājaśekhara in his *Bālarāmāyaṇa* alludes to the appearance of Sanskrit Chāyās for Prākṛit texts in mss. of dramas as a normal

1. Pollock : 66
2. Keith : 334

feature. Literary Prākṛits thus, already before the beginning of the second millennium, ceased to exist in the society either as first or second languages. Sheldon Pollock observes that the Sanskrit poets did not speak Prākṛit (as they did not speak Sanskrit either) at least in the form in which we know it in Prākṛit literary texts. He remarks that the word 'Prākṛit' typically connotes a literary language rather than a spoken vernacular.

The language of the drama, be it Sanskrit or Prākṛit, is thus a non living literary language. Neither Śaurasēnī nor Mahārāṣṭrī represents in any form the regions after which they are named nor do they offer identity to any specific speech community.

It is believed that literature holds a mirror unto society. The issue of language and identity implies in fact, the existence of language as a social phenomenon, be it a part of the living present or frozen past. It is an accepted fact the creative literature depicts a world mixed with fact and fancy and a historian has to carefully isolate the one from the other. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent we can reconstruct facts of history from the classical Indian literature composed in literary languages far removed from spoken vernaculars. The world of makebelieve of this literature begins, indeed, with the very medium of expression. This reminds me of a very interesting remark by Woolner in connection with the use of Sanskrit throughout the dramatic performance by the hero: "The hero therefore spoke Sanskrit (because he was educated) and by a stage convention spoke it always, just as stage kings almost always, and real kings rarely, wear a crown."¹ However, the place of honour accorded to Sanskrit in Sanskrit drama can have historical implication ; it may suggest that the Nāṭyaśāstra was a part of the movement, which started some time before the beginning of C.E., to restore Sanskrit to its pristine glory which was overshadowed by the dominance of Prākṛits.

Scholars, both of Prākṛit language as well as classical Indian drama, have, time and again, pointed out how the dramatic Prākṛits are far removed from their vernacular counterparts. Keith has, for instance, pointed out that the usage of Prākṛits in drama is motivated by literary purpose rather than an attempt to

1. Woolner : 89

imitate the speech of the day.¹ He says "It cannot be held that..... the usage of the plays could be put down simply to the copying of the actual practice in life."² And therefore, the statement made by C. Rajendran, namely, "the language used by the diverse elements of this vast social hierarchy gives us an idea of their social identity in general manner,"³ has to be taken with a grain of salt.

This reminds me of some interesting statements made by Sheldon Pollock in his recent articles entitled "Sanskrit Literary Culture from inside Out." I quote a few below:

"The theory no less than the practice of Sanskrit Kāvya..... was the single most powerful determinant of vernacular conceptions of literature.... what makes Kāvya different from everything else has essentially to do with the language itself." "Hardly more attention is given to what Kāvya means as a form of moral reasoning, as a way of understanding how life is to be lived." "It is the exclusion of natural language from the realm of literature that, to a significant degree defines Sanskrit literary culture."⁴ He comments on the discovery of the fragments of Aśvaghōṣa's dramas in a far off place in China as follows; "This range of circulation was made possible not so much by the religious universalism of Buddhism as by the literary universalism of Sanskrit and its aesthetic power."⁵

The choice of language in classical Indian literary tradition is, then, as pointed out by Sheldon Pollock, dictated by aesthetic considerations, by its transethnic and global character, rather than by social considerations. He cites examples from ancient history of India, of Buddhist and Jains profusely writing in Sanskrit and, before that, Brahmanic rulers promoting Prākṛit literature.

With this I am forced to arrive at, rather an antithesis, namely, that the choice of language does not necessarily speak of

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1. Keith : 74
 2. Ibid : 334
 3. Rajendran : 131
 4. Pollock : 46
 5. Ibid.

identities, or, sometimes it speaks of identities which are beyond social and political domains.

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