An Introduction to Indian Literary Theory

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Lecture- 16

Kavya and three languages

Hello everyone, in the previous lectures, we saw the origins and development of kavya tradition in Sanskrit. We saw how Sanskrit came to be used as a literary language, the origin of kavya tradition in Sanskrit, and the importance of Valmiki Ramayana as a text anticipating some of the crucial concerns of literary theory, Today we are going to take a look at the languages in which kavya was composed.

Could kavya be composed in all the languages? According to Sanskrit literary theoreticians, only three languages are fit for the production of kāvya. These three languages include Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramśa. Though Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramśa were the three primary languages, sometimes we would see literary theoreticians maintaining that there are four or five or sometimes six or seven languages that are fit for literary production. Here we should note that the number increases not because new languages are being used for literary production but because these literary theoreticians are considering the dialectical variations of Prakrit or Apabhramśa as a separate language. So, later on, when I say that some literary theoreticians are considering six or seven languages fit for the composition of kāvya, I do not mean to say that new vernacular languages were slowly making their entry into the list of languages fit for literary expression. It is just that they are considering the dialectical variations of either Prakrit or Apabhramsa as separate languages.

Unlike Sanskrit, for which literary theory acknowledges a single, unified register, Prakrit was recognized from a relatively early date to have three or four regional types, namely Maharashtri belonging to Maharātra, Shauraseni belonging to Surasena, Gaudi or Magadhi belonging respectively to Bengal and Bihar, and finally Lāti belonging to Lāṭa in southern Gujarat. Although the word Prakrit can refer to all these dialectical varieties, the term “Prakrit” in the gamut of kavya is often used in a more restricted sense to refer to Maharashtri Prākrit, which was generally considered the best dialectical variation to be used in literature. The same was

the case with Apabhramśa. In scholarly discourse, the term Apabramśa refers to anything that deviates from correct Sanskrit. But in literary circles, the term Apabramśa denotes the dialect spoken by Ābhīras. "Ābhīra" refers to a pastoral people in western India. Although Apabhramsha was initially considered a vulgar language, the negative connotations associated with it eventually gave way to recognition, and it was slowly given admission in the parlance of poetry. The Vedic textual scholar Bhaṭṭa Kumārila's observation about the Buddhist scholars composing their works in Aprabramśa marks the entry of Aprabramśa into the field of literature. Although Bhaṭṭa Kumārila's observation about the Apabramśa language is derogatory, it marks a historic shift in the seventh century. Kumārila says: "The scriptures of the Buddhists are linguistically corrupt and so could not possibly be the holy word. . . . When texts are composed of words that are grammatically false—with words of the Magadhan, or Dakshinatya languages, and even worse, the Apabhramshas of these languages . . . how could their doctrines possibly be true?" (Tantravārttika on Mīmāmsasūtra 1.3.12, p. 164). But an important thing that we need to note is that the Apabramśa that is used in literature was a transregional variety and less local. In other words, the Apabhramsha found in literary texts was linguistically unlocalizable, largely without regional variation. It was processed in such a way that it can be used in a linguistically homogenous manner by whoever uses it in the Sanskrit cosmopolis. Whatever may have been the original regional specificity of Prakrit and Apabhramsa, by the time of Bhamaha and Dandin, both the literary Prakrits and Apabhramsha had already been subjected to philological analysis and standardization. But the exact process through which Prakrit and Apabhramsha languages got standardized is still a matter to be explored.

When I say that only these three languages were considered suitable for the creation of literary works, I do not mean to say that other languages were not used in kavya at all. While Sanskrit, Prākrit and Apabhramśa were used to compose the whole literary work, "secondary" languages, such as local dialects and languages, were used for mimetic purposes to emulate the speech of certain characters. For example, in a drama, the royal women always speak Shauraseni, ruffians in Magadhi, and so on. These local languages were spoken by some of the characters in drama or literature to make the literary representation look natural. The bottom line of what I have been saying is that the local languages, other than the three languages we saw earlier, are used just to give a natural colour to the story.

I will explain this point with the help of Udyotanasūri's *Kuvalayāmāla,* which is a samkīrṇa-kathā or prose-verse tale. The author notes that this tale is primarily told in Maharaṣtrī Prākrit. This does not mean that there are no instances where the local languages are spoken in the story. During his travels, the hero wanders through the great bazaar of Vijayapura, where he hears people speaking sixteen different deśabhāṣ or the languages of Place. To give the readers an idea of how the bazaar looks like, Uddyotana provides a snippet of conversation in local languages. So, the work, on the whole, is composed in Prākrit, which is conventionally considered one of the three languages fit for the production of kāvya. But the local languages are mentioned for imitative purposes.

Writers as early as Bharata talks about this three-language formula in poetic production. Although Bharata's observations are specifically in the context of drama, they can easily be made applicable in the case of kavya as well. Bharata is also of the view that only three languages are used for the composition of nātya, namely Sanskrit, Prākrit and deśabhāṣa. It is significant to note here that in place of Apabhramsha, Bharata uses the word deśabhāṣa or the "languages of Place." As Pollock rightly points out, we can undoubtedly say that this is one of the earliest "uses of a term that was to have a great afterlife in South Asian intellectual history". In drama, Bharata says, all the characters cannot indiscriminately speak Sanskrit, Prakrit and Desabhasa. For example, Sanskrit is primarily used by the four kinds of heroes such as *dhīrodātta*, *dhīralalita*, *dhīroddhata* and *dhīraśānta.* They can also speak in Prākrit at times, if need be, especially for imitative purposes. The prostitutes, since they interact with all kinds of people, should necessarily and also for the benefit of learning all kinds of art forms, should speak in Sanskrit. The celestial women will also have to speak in Sanskrit since they interact with gods. The saints, brahmins and the noble ones should necessarily speak in Sanskrit. The poor and the extravagant ones should not speak in Sanskrit. They should speak in Prakrit. The ones who have impersonated themselves as the ordinary ones, the Buddhist and Jain monks should speak in Prākrit. The same is the case with women, children, and men with feminine qualities. They all speak in Prākrit. A celestial woman who is born on earth should speak only in Prakrit.

According to Bharata, Prākrit is unsophisticated Sanskrit. In other words, in Prakrit, Sanskrit avoids the sophistication it has. There are three kinds of Prakrit in nāṭya — samānaśabda, vibraṣṭa and deśigata. If the same words are used both in Sanskrit and Prakrit without any change, it is called *samānaśabda* or Sanskrit identical. Bharata says that words such as kamala,

amala, renu, taranga, lola, salila, etc. are used both in Prakrit and Sanskrit without any change. So, Prakrit words that look similar to their equivalents in Sanskrit are called samānaśabda. If the svara or vowel and vyanjana or consonant sounds in the samyuktāksara of a Sanskrit sound either change or get dropped, it is called vibrasta or Sanskrit-derived words. Deśigata is the regional variety of words. Finally, Bharata mentions seven regional or local languages namely magadhi, avantija, prācya, śauraseni, arddhamāgadhi, bhāhlīka and dakṣiṇātya. He also talks about six vibāṣās such as *Śakāra*, *Ābhīra*, *Caṇḍāla*, *Śabara*, *Dramiḍa*, *Āndhra* and the low language of the forest-dwellers. After listing the languages, Bharata then proceeds to apportion them among various characters in a drama, just as he does with Sanskrit and Prakrit. For example, Magadhi is used in the king's harem, Ardhamagadhi is used by royal servants, military men, merchants and so on.

Bhāmaha, in his *Kāvyālaṅkāra,* also says that kāvya can be composed in gadya or prose and padya or poetry. In this context, he also says that it is composed primarily in three languages, namely Sanskrit, Prākrit and Apabramśa. That it is possible to make kavya only in this triad of languages is the unanimous judgment of Sanskrit literary theory from its beginnings in Bhamaha and Dandin. Rudraṭa later limits the number of languages that are fit for poetic composition to six. It should be noted that Rudraṭa's division is not at war with the observation of others. But the difference is simply because, in addition of Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramsa, Rudraṭa also includes all three variants of Prakrit as three separate languages. The languages meant for kāvya that Rudraṭa mentions include Sanskrit, Apabhramśa, Prākrit, Magadhi, Śauraseni, and Maharaṣtri.

A century later, Rajaśekhara imagines the linguistic body of Kāvyapuruṣa or the Primal Being of Literature. Rājaśekhara opines that the mouth of Kāvyapuruṣa consists of Sanskrit, arms of Prakrit, especially Maharashtri, groin of Apabhramsha, feet of Paishachi, and chest of mixed language. This further shows that the choice of language for the composition of *kāvya* always remained very limited for the poets.

Pollock observes that "This conception of a closed set of literary languages, proclaimed at the very beginning of the critical tradition and undoubtedly present from the very commencement of the era of kāvya, remained in force for Sanskrit intellectuals even when. . . new forms of vernacular literary culture were making their appearance everywhere from the beginning of the second millennium. . . " This is evident from the observation of Śāradātanaya. Śāradātanaya,

in his twelfth century Bhāvaprakāśa, observes that not all the languages are fit for the representation of the world in nātya. Śāradātanaya observes that there are so many languages in this world. In a survey of language and region at the end of the work, the author acknowledges the variety of languages spoken in the vast world. He says that in Bhāratavarṣa, there are around eighteen languages by which people converse with each other. Some of these languages are named after the region in which they are spoken. But these languages, he says, are not fit for the production of kāvya. He calls them the uncultured or *mleccha* languages.

Śāradātanaya declares that these local languages are not at all capable of executing the literary function. The languages used for drama or *nāṭya* are the following five, six, or seven. This categorization varies depending on how one categorizes languages. If we categorize Sanskrit, Prakrit, Paishachi, Magadhi, and Shauraseni, then there are five languages; they are six if we incorporate their dialectal forms as a separate collective category. And some people reckon Apabhramśa as an independent seventh language. There could have been experiments in other local languages. But the fact is that they continued to remain experiments. The mid-eleventh-century Kashmirian Kśemendra's words merit attention here. In his Aucityavicāracarcā, Kṣemendra advises the aspiring poets to "listen to the songs and lyrics and rasa -laden poems in local languages and to go to popular gatherings and learn local languages." But the irony is that Kṣemendra himself does not follow his advice. In the large portion of Kṣemendra's literary corpus, there is not a scrap of anything but Sanskrit. Even the Buddhists who took a very strong anti-vaidika stance consciously stayed away from composing *kāvya*s in local languages. So, Pollock observes that "It is difficult not to conclude from all this that aside from dramatic mimesis and the occasional pedagogical demonstration or tour de force, multilinguality has a purely imaginary status in Sanskrit literary culture. In actual fact, a writer was a Sanskrit writer or a Prakrit writer or an Apabhramsha writer."

It is also significant to note that although kavya could be produced in all these three languages, creative writers often stick to one of these three languages while forming their oeuvre. In other words, they often chose to write primarily in one of these three languages. The three names that come to our mind when we think of such exhortations for such experimentations in local languages are Rājaśekhara, Visvanatha and Anandavardhana. Rājaśekhara opines that the poet should choose the language of his composition with much forethought and after taking into account many aspects. Rājaśekhara opines: "A poet must first of all fashion himself. He should ask himself: What is my inborn talent; what are my strengths with respect to languages? What

does society favor? What does my patron favor; what kinds of poetic assemblies does he occupy himself with; what is he emotionally attached to? The poet should then adopt a particular language—so say the authorities. Moreover, a given language is adopted by virtue of [its prevalence in] a given region, as it is said, “The people of Gauda [Bengal] are devoted to Sanskrit, the people of Lata [south Gujarat] are fond of Prakrit, the people of all Malava, the Takkas [Panjabis], and the Bhadanakas employ their own Apabhramsha, the people of Avanti, of Pariyatra, and of Daśapura [Chattisgarh] use Bhutabhasha [Paishachi]. The poet who dwells in mid-Madhyadeśa is expert in all [these] languages”. Pollock says that "Rajaśekhara’s ideal image of a poet’s unlimited creativity in all four languages seems to be just that, an ideal. If we examine the actual literary-historical record available to us—admittedly, counterexamples may have vanished— it is remarkable how very few writers produced literature in different primary languages". The use of local languages was primarily for mimetic purposes. Rājaśekhara himself, as an experiment, composed one play wholly in Prakrit titled Karpūramañjarī. Remember, it is the only such play and was certainly an experiment. All the other works of Rājaśekhara’s oeuvre are in Sanskrit. Visvanatha tells us he wrote only one Prakrit poem besides his Sanskrit works. The same is the case with Anandavardhana, who wrote a text titled Visamabanalila in Prakrit “for the education of poets,” in addition to his courtly epic in Sanskrit. This shows that writers composing works in more than one primary literary language were quite rare, Muñja, king of the Paramaras and Bhoja’s uncle, appears to be the only Sanskrit poet who produced a serious corpus of verse in Apabhramsha as well as Sanskrit.

So far, we have been talking about the opinion of literary theoreticians. Now let us turn our attention to poets to see how they are looking at this division of three languages. Abdul Rahman’s Samdeśarāsaka is a case in point. Samdeśarāsaka is a messenger poem composed in the tradition of Kālidasa s famous Sanskrit poem Meghadūta. He identifies himself as an Apabhramsha poet and makes it clear that he considered himself part of the lineage of those who “became poets in Apabhramsha, Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Paishachi”

One final example would be the story of Guṇāḍhya, the author of Bṛhadkathā, who was fated to observe a vow of silence in Sanskrit, Prākrit, and Apabhramśa. This story is narrated in the prologue of Guṇādhya, minister to the Sātavāhana emperor, wagers that the grammarian Śarvavarman will be unable to teach the king Sanskrit in six months as he has pledged to do. Śarvavarman, who knows how difficult this task is, throws himself at the mercy of Kārtikeya, Śiva’s son. The god’s inspiration enables him to compose the Kātantra or the Brief System that,

reduces the proverbial twelve years required to learn Sanskrit by only half. By means of it, Śarvavarman was able to achieve his purpose and win the wager. Having failed in the wager, Guṇāḍhya was fated to observe a vow of silence in Sanskrit, Prākrit, and Apabhramṡa, and he composes his Bṛhadkathā in Paiśāci.

As per the evidence that we have from the vast library of kāvyas that we have, we have only a few works in which local languages take the role of the primary language of expression. Pollock's observation about the choice of Sanskrit as the medium of creative expression is noteworthy here. Pollock, in his "Sanskrit Literary Culture Inside Out", says, "Accordingly, when poets chose to write in the Sanskrit language, they were choosing, along with a certain aesthetic, a certain readership—in this case, a cosmopolitan, virtually global readership. And they did this, we may accordingly infer, because they had something cosmopolitan, something global, to say". The choice of the language for the literary production was always determined by the genre. The *mahākāvya*, or courtly epic, and the ākhyāyikā or the dynastic prose-poem, were composed only in Sanskrit. The skandhaka which is a courtly epic genre differing from the mahākāvya in the metrical organization, and the gāthā, which is a type of erotic verse, were composed in Prakrit. Apabramśa was the language in which, the rāsaka and avaskandha, which are two "pastoral" genres, were composed. No other language could be used as the "primary" code for these genres, and no secondary uses of language are to be found in them. So they are called śuddha or monoglot literary forms. A kathā could be written in any of the three languages. The same was the case with the independent lyric called *muktaka*. We can say for certain that, by and large, the genre rule held firm in the praxis of kāvya.

So, we have covered quite a few points in this class. Let us revise them once again. We have seen that only three languages were used to produce kāvya in Sanskrit literary tradition, and these languages included Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramśa. Sometimes, Paiśāci was also included. Among the various dialects of the Prākrit language, Mahārāṣtri prākrit was chosen to produce kāvya. In scholarly discourse, the term Apabramśa refers to anything that deviates from correct Sanskrit. But in literary circles, the term Apabramśa denotes the dialect spoken by Ābhīras. While Sanskrit, Prākrit and Apabhramśa were used to compose the whole literary work, "secondary" languages such as local dialects were used for mimetic purposes to emulate the speech of certain characters.