

Foreigners, Brahmins, Poets, or What? The Sociolinguistics of the Sanskrit Renaissance

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Abstract

A puzzle in the sociolinguistic history of Sanskrit is that texts with authenticated dates first appear in the 2nd century CE, after five centuries of exclusively Prakrit inscriptions. Various hypotheses have tried to account for this fact. Senart (1886) proposed that Sanskrit gained wider currency through Buddhists and Jains. Franke (1902) claimed that Sanskrit died out in India and was artificially reintroduced. Lévi (1902) argued for usurpation of Sanskrit by the Kshatrapas, foreign rulers who employed brahmins in administrative positions. Pisani (1955) instead viewed the “Sanskrit Renaissance” as the brahmins’ attempt to combat these foreign invaders. Ostler (2005) attributed the victory of Sanskrit to its ‘cultivated, self-conscious charm’; his acknowledgment of prior Sanskrit use by brahmins and kshatriyas suggests that he did not consider the victory a sudden event.

The hypothesis that the early-CE public appearance of Sanskrit was a sudden event is revived by Pollock (1996, 2006). He argues that Sanskrit was originally confined to ‘sacerdotal’ contexts; that it never was a natural spoken language, as shown by its inability to communicate childhood experiences; and that ‘the epigraphic record (thin though admittedly it is) suggests ... that [tribal chiefs] help[ed] create’ a new political civilization, the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis”, ‘by employing Sanskrit in a hitherto unprecedented way’. Crucial in his argument is the claim that *kāvya* literature was a foundational characteristic of this new civilization and that *kāvya* has no significant antecedents. I show that Pollock’s arguments are problematic. He ignores evidence for a continuous non-sacerdotal use of

Sanskrit, as in the epics and fables.

The employment of nursery words like *tāta* ‘daddy’/ *tata* ‘sonny’ (also used as general terms of endearment), or *ambā/ambikā* ‘mommy; mother’ attest to Sanskrit’s ability to communicate childhood experiences. *Kāvya*, the foundation of Pollock’s “Sanskrit Cosmopolis”, has antecedents in earlier Sanskrit (and Pali). Most importantly, Pollock fails to show how his powerful political-poetic *kāvya* tradition could have arisen *ex nihilo*. To produce their poetry, the poets would have had to draw on a living, spoken language with all its different uses, and that language must have been current in a larger linguistic community beyond the poets, whether that community was restricted to brahmins (as commonly assumed) or also included *kshatriyas* (as suggested by Ostler). I conclude by considering implications for the “Sanskritization” of Southeast Asia and the possible parallel of modern “Indian English” literature.

Keywords: ‘*Sanskrit-speaking*’ villages, Hindu nationalism, linguistic utopia, social imaginary, Indian Census 2011

Introduction

A puzzle in the sociolinguistic history of Sanskrit is that Classical-language texts, written on datable materials, first appear in the early centuries AD, after some five centuries of exclusively Prakrit inscriptions. The first authenticated attestation of Classical Sanskrit is believed to be a 2nd c. AD inscription of Rudradāman, ruler of the Kṣatrapas, a dynasty originating outside India. Various hypotheses have been advanced to account for this fact. Generally they accept the apparent break in textual attestation at face value, and consider the blossoming of Classical Sanskrit literature in the early AD era and especially under the Guptas (late 3rd to 6th c. AD) as a sudden revival. For instance, Senart (1886) proposed that Sanskrit gained wider, secular currency through Buddhists and Jains. Franke (1902) claimed that Sanskrit died out in India and was artificially reintroduced. Lévi (1902) saw the starting point in a usurpation of Sanskrit by the foreign Kṣatrapa rulers who employed brahmins in administrative positions. Pisani (1955) instead attributed the Sanskrit Renaissance to the attempt of brahmins to combat these foreign invaders.

In a 1976 paper, Hock and Pandharipande surveyed these arguments, as well as other, often dissenting publications including Kielhorn 1885, Jacobi 1911, Chatterji 1960, Renou 1965, and Gumperz 1969, and concluded that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the Sanskrit Renaissance was not a sudden use of Sanskrit for secular or literary purposes, but rather, an increase in its use, especially in its adoption by heterodox religions. They thus accepted Filliozat’s (1972) proposal that this increased use resulted from the adoption of Sanskrit as link language ‘at a time when ... the overall linguistic situation [in South Asia] had become extremely complicated’ (1976: 123-124).

Several recent publications have reopened the debate. Ostler (2005) attributes the victory of

Sanskrit to its ‘cultivated, self-conscious charm’ and elaborated grammar. Pollock (1996, 2006) revives the hypothesis that the early-AD public appearance of Sanskrit was a sudden event, arguing that that ‘the epigraphic record (thin though admittedly it is) suggests ... that [tribal chiefs] help[ed] create¹’ what Pollock calls a new political civilization, the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis”, ‘by employing Sanskrit in a hitherto unprecedented way’, in the form of *praśasti* (royal eulogy) and *kāvya* (a highly ornate literary tradition). In response to Ostler and Pollock, Bronkhorst (2007/2010 and 2011) argues that it was brahmanism that spread the use of Sanskrit, as brahmins and their social order spread throughout India and beyond.

Of these approaches, Ostler’s is easiest to dispense with. Without further elaboration, the claim that its charm helped Sanskrit to victory is excessively esoteric; and while Sanskrit did have an elaborate grammatical tradition, the claim that this was responsible for the victory of Sanskrit requires more than cursory justification.¹

The major focus of this paper is to evaluate Pollock’s proposal that the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” was a radical innovation and to propose an alternative account. In this context, Bronkhorst’s proposal provides an important alternative, which adds to traditional arguments against the claim that the Sanskrit Renaissance was a sudden, revolutionary development.

Section 2 of the paper presents an outline of Pollock’s claims and arguments. Pollock’s account is evaluated in section 3. An alternative account is presented in sections 4 to 6. Section 4 focuses on the role of the Sanskrit epics in setting the stage for the Renaissance; section 5 adds the role of brahmins, and section 6 addresses the importance of traditional education and the fact that it was conducted in Sanskrit, by brahmins. The conclusion is that the Sanskrit renaissance was not a sudden development, but the culmination of developments that had started before the 1st century AD. Section 7 presents a summary of my findings and their implications.

Pollock’s Claims and Arguments

Pollock claims that traditional scholarship has failed to explain the expanded use of Sanskrit. See for instance the following quote.

‘... Sanskrit studies, heir to a brilliant and imperious intellectual tradition that had set its own agenda in the important issues of the human sciences, has [sic] had grounds to rest content with addressing the questions predefined by this tradition—and the historical expansion of the realm of Sanskrit culture was not one of them.’ (2006: 11; emphasis added)

He therefore argues that a new explanation is needed, and that such an explanation needs to center on the idea that ‘[t]o some degree the Sanskrit “cosmopolis” ... consists precisely in [a] common aesthetics of political culture, a kind of poetry of politics’ (1996: 199-200) that, crucially, was driven

by ‘[t]wo key inventions, the second a subspecies of the first ... : kāvya, or written literature, and praśasti, or inscriptional royal panegyric’ (2006: 13; see also 257-258).¹

According to Pollock, this “aesthetic practice” was an invention, rather than a simple resurgence. See for instance the following quote.

... We may thus wish to rethink the received account that imagines a “resurgence [Pollock’s italics] of Brahmanism” leading to a “re-assertion of Sanskrit” as the language of literature and administration after the Maurya period ... and consider instead the possibility that a new cultural formation, a Sanskrit cosmopolitan formation, was on the point of being invented. (1996: 206-207; small caps by HHH)¹

Moreover, in Pollock’s view this invention is first attested in the 2nd-century AD inscription of Rudradāman:

The first public political text in Sanskrit of importance is indubitably the celebrated inscription of the Kṣatrapa king, Rudrādaman ... The text of this inscription has been known for more than a century and a half ... What I want to highlight, however, is the fact that in all the hundred and fifty years since ... nothing has been discovered to diminish the cultural-historical significance of the Kṣatrapa break (1996: 203-204; similarly 2006: 73)

In support of his claim that kāvya literature was a novel phenomenon, Pollock presents the following arguments.

... the existence of what the next thousand years of cultural tradition will identify as kāvya is exceedingly difficult to demonstrate for much before this period. A stray reference in Pāṇini, a few citations in Patañjali (who never uses the term itself) prove precious little, even if we could securely date these references; the total absence of any kāvya texts (or memory of such texts) itself is rather more instructive. (1996: 205; similarly 2006: 80)

Further, Pollock claims, prior to this development of “this-worldly” literature, Sanskrit was only a “sacerdotal” language (2006: 14). See the following citation.

... there can be little doubt that for Patañjali, principal heir and final arbiter of the vaidika grammatical tradition, the purposes of Sanskrit language analysis were more or less exclusively tied to sacred performance and to the pedagogical practices, both social and discursive, pertaining to knowledge of the sacred ... with the exception of the Rāmāyaṇa, no remains of a nonsacral, this-worldly Sanskrit are extant from the early epoch of literacy (from the third century B.C.E. to, say, the first century C.E.) ... (2006: 47-48)

Pollock (2006) acknowledges the important role that traditional grammar and the Epics, especially the Mahābhārata, played in the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” by devoting two chapters to these topics (chapters 4 and 6, respectively). However, his major emphasis is on kāvya and the related praśasti as defining the new “aesthetics of political culture” that defined the “Cosmopolis”.

Finally, regarding the question of who initiated these new developments, Pollock is remarkably reticent. Only a few passages offer glimpses of what he may have had in mind, and they raise more questions than they answer. For instance, who were the ‘traditional intellectuals and religious professionals’ and the ‘scattered groups of traders and adventurers’ in the first quote below, and what precisely was their role in “Sanskrit Cosmopolis”? And who were the ‘peripatetic literati’ who diffused kāvya and praśasti in the second quote, and what were their qualifications?

Sanskrit’s spread was effected by traditional intellectuals and religious professionals, often following in the train of scattered groups of traders and adventurers, and carrying with them disparate and decidedly uncanonized texts of a wide variety of competing religious orders, Śaiva, Buddhist, Vaiṣṇava, and others. (1996: 199)

The conceptual space of Sanskrit texts was slow to adjust, or so one might think, to the new and larger circulatory spaces through which people had increasingly begun to move. Indeed, these actual spaces were vast, and so was the spread of Sanskrit culture, enabled by the diffusion of kāvya and praśasti on the part of peripatetic literati and the cultivation everywhere of a literarily uniform Sanskrit. (2006: 16)

Evaluation of Pollock’s Account

Pollock’s account certainly is interesting and provocative, but it suffers from numerous weaknesses, some of which seem to be detrimental to his argument.

First, there must be the question of the invention of kāvya, praśasti, and the poetry of politics, and the claim that earlier uses of Sanskrit were confined to the “sacerdotal” (i.e. priestly, ritualist) sphere. The idea that a whole new genre (or set of genres) could have been created ex nihilo strains credulity. There would have to have been a tradition of this-worldly language use and of poetic sophistication that the composers of the new poetry were able to tap into, and the intended audience would likewise have to have had a sufficient command of this-worldly Sanskrit language and poetics. Otherwise the products of Pollock’s inventors would have been perceived as mere sound and fury, signifying nothing.

A second problem is Pollock’s claim that ‘... Sanskrit studies ... has [sic] had grounds to rest content with addressing the questions predefined by this tradition—and the historical expansion of the realm of Sanskrit culture was not one of them.’ This assessment is clearly inaccurate, for there has been – and continues to be – an extensive literature on what has been called the “Sanskrit Renaissance”. Remarkably, Pollock largely ignores this literature or only obliquely refers to it when, for instance, he

claims that “A stray reference in Pāṇini, a few citations in Patañjali (who never uses the term [kāvya] itself) prove precious little ...”

The extensive survey of earlier literature in Hock and Pandharipande (1976)¹ alone demonstrates a lively discussion in traditional Sanskrit studies. This literature points to a long tradition of secular literary use prior to the beginnings of Pollock’s Sanskrit Cosmopolis and, thus, provides at least a partial answer to the question of in what literary and linguistic setting Pollock’s invention of kāvya and praśasti may have flourished. The following expands on that survey.

I begin with the claim (not addressed in Hock and Pandharipande) that Rudradāman’s 2nd-century AD inscription is the first public political text in Sanskrit, and that there are no precedents in earlier inscriptions. Solomon’s (1998) account of inscriptional languages paints a different picture – not a sudden break, but a slow process in which the original tradition of Prakrit inscriptions (continuing Aśoka’s precedent) comes to increasingly compete with other languages, and eventually is superseded by them, from Sanskritized Prakrit (with only limited influence of Sanskrit on Prakrit), to Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit (EHS), to texts with EHS in their prose portions but more or less correct Classical Sanskrit in metrical portions of the texts,¹ to the Sanskrit of Rudradāman’s inscription. As Solomon notes, even the Sanskrit of Rudradāman’s inscription, ‘like early literary Sanskrit generally, ... shows the influence of the less formal epic-vernacular style in which some of the grammatical niceties of Pāṇinian/classical Sanskrit were not observed’ (90). Moreover, ‘further specimens of such poetic praśastis are not found until the Gupta era’ (89).

This evidence shows that Rudradāman’s use of (more or less) Classical Sanskrit is not a sudden creation *ex nihilo*, but rather the culmination of a slow process of “Sanskritization”. Moreover, Solomon’s observation that Rudradāman’s inscription exhibits ‘the less formal epic-vernacular style ...’ will turn out to be relevant for developing an alternative account to that of Pollock.

Similarly, the use of kāvya and praśasti, and of ornate, “this-worldly” Sanskrit poetry in general has long-standing antecedents, rather than being a sudden invention *ex nihilo*. According to Aśvaghōṣa, a poet named Vararuci (identical with the author of Patañjali’s *vārauca kāvyam*?) composed six verses extolling King Nanda (4th c. BC) and also was his minister (Winternitz 1922: 391-392, note 4). References in Pāṇini (ca. 400 BC) suggest that the epic tradition, likewise secular (at least in its beginnings), started even earlier (van Buitenen 1973), and the vast epic Sanskrit tradition continues and grows unabated into the early first millennium AD. In his great commentary on Pāṇini (2nd c. BC), Patañjali refers to secular literature (Kielhorn 1885, Gaurinath Shastri 1960). We also have evidence for a tradition of lighter narrative literature, in the form of fables. While the extant fable collection of the *Pañcatantra* may be difficult to date, Hertel (1908) suggests that an early specimen of the tradition, the *Tantrākhyāyikā*, existed as early as approximately 200 BC; and Patañjali refers to some fable topoi, such as the Goat and the Razor (Gaurinath Shastri 1960: 53). Finally, the *Arthaśāstra*, originally composed in the 4th to 3rd c. BC (the extant version is a 4th c. AD recension), and similarly the

Kāmaśāstra, are early secular works which presuppose and explicitly require the secular use of Sanskrit (Jacobi 1911, see also Olivelle 2013: 25-31). Based on such evidence, Jacobi concludes that Sanskrit probably was used even at the court of Aśoka (3rd c. BC), but for purposes different from those of Prakrit: Sanskrit was used for internal administrative or diplomatic communications, while Prakrit was used for proclamations to the general population.

There is evidence, too, that antecedents of literary features that are characteristic of kāvya go back several centuries before the Rudradāman's inscription and the "Sanskrit Renaissance". In his 2nd c. BC Mahābhāṣya, Patañjali cites numerous poetic fragments in different meters (e.g. vasantatilaka) that are not part of the Vedic tradition but characterize secular literature; and the apparently contemporary Piṅgala Sūtras (Kielhorn 1885, Winternitz 1922: 33, Gaurinath Shastri 1960: 52-53) likewise deal with post-Vedic metres. Even the Mahābhārata, not generally recognized as ornate literature, has been argued to use poetic devices such as simile, paranomasia, assonance, and rhyme that characterize later poetic compositions (Sharma 1966). In fact, passages like the one below (cited in part by Sharma) exhibit a great degree of phonetic play, involving both related and unrelated words, such as gaṅgā 'Ganges' and gaganā- 'sky', alliteration in mālām muktāmayīm 'a garland of pearls', repetitions of kva cid 'somewhere', or the passage toyaninadair nadantī nādam 'roaring a roar with the down-roars of water' containing different forms of the root nad- 'resound' and with nadair perhaps reminding the listener of the word nadī 'river'.¹

tataḥ papāta gaganād gaṅgā himavataḥ sutā
samudbhrāntamahāvartā mīnagrāhasamākulā (3.108.8)

tām dadhāra haro rājan gaṅgām gaganamekhalām
lalāṭadeśe patitām mālām muktāmayīm iva (3.108.9)

sā babhūva visarpantī tridhā rājan samudragā
phenapuñjākulajalā haṁsānām iva pañktayaḥ (3.108.10)

kva cid ābhogaṭilā praskhalantī kva cit kva cit
svaphenapaṭasaṁvītā matteva pramadāvrajat

kva cit sā toyaninadair nadantī nādam uttamam
kva cid ākāśam āvartaiḥ saṁkṣipantīva sarvaśaḥ (3.108.11)

evam prakārān subahūn kurvantī gaganāc cyutā (3.108.12a)

'Then the Gaṅgā, Himalaya's daughter, burst from the heaven, her whirlpools twirling, stirring with fishes and sharks. Śiva held her, O king, the Gaṅgā, girt with the heaven, whirling down on his brow like a pearl-bedecked garland. Flying apart threefold like flocks of swans, she coursed to the ocean, her waters foaming. Here turning in twists, here tumbling, covered with foam, like a woman drunk she moved forth. Here roaring her roar with the down-roar of waters; here disturbing the space with her whirls, as it were. Thus taking on form after form, burst from the heaven ...' (free translation, trying to capture some of the poetic flavor)

More specifically, numerous publications have noted the use of or references to kāvya in texts preceding the early centuries AD. Patañjali (2nd c. BC) refers to a vāraruca kāvya (Kielhorn 1885, Gaurinath Shastri 1960: 52-53); and a long scholarly tradition locates kāvya literature in Middle Indo-Aryan, including Pāli, in the late centuries BC; see e.g. Winternitz 1922, Lienhard 1984, Warder 1990, Jamison 2007.

While Jamison accepts the common view that during the late centuries BC, kāvya flourished only in Middle Indo-Aryan and that ‘the language of the power elite in the post-Vedic period was not Sanskrit but various forms of Middle Indic’ (146), she also cites Pali/Buddhist passages that – disapprovingly – associate kāvya with brahmanism, and notes that the most transparently anti-brahmin passage actually uses the partly Sanskritized form kavya.

The fact that Patañjali already refers to a Sanskrit vāraruca kāvya and that, excepting the Rāmāyaṇa, it was the brahmin-Buddhist author Aśvaghōṣa who composed the first extant kāvyas in Sanskrit might suggest a different perspective, namely that even at the time of the Pali texts, there was a tradition of Sanskrit kāvya, composed by brahmins – perhaps brahmin members of the Buddhist saṅgha, but that the ornate character of their compositions was disdained by more “orthodox” Buddhists.

Jamison, in fact, suggests that there was an unbroken tradition of ornate poetry, from the time of the Vedic poets through late Vedic and Middle Indo-Aryan to the early centuries AD, especially in the form of the praśasti, with poets changing their target from the gods treated as kings to “real”, secular kings. While this position is perhaps over-argued, there is clearly no need to assume a creation of kāvya ex nihilo by “peripatetic literati” or the like during the early centuries AD.

To sum up the findings so far: Rudradāman’s inscription and its kāvya-style praśasti in Classical Sanskrit has a long prehistory, as regards both inscriptional language use (with a slow trajectory of “Sanskritization”) and the secular, “this-worldly” literary use of Sanskrit (post-Vedic metres, references to and use of kāvya, as well as other, less “ornate” literary genres, including the great epic of the Mahābhārata). There is, thus, no reason to assume that Rudradāman’s inscription and the flourishing of Sanskrit in the “Cosmopolis” or the “Renaissance” under the Guptas constitute a sudden creation or invention ex nihilo. Rather, it seems advisable to look for an alternative explanation that better conforms with the evidence.

Toward an Alternative Explanation, Take One: The Role of the Epics

One important factor that seems to have contributed to the spread of Sanskrit is the tremendous importance of the great epics (the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa) in the early Indian literary tradition, combined with the fact that the Sanskrit employed in the epics differs from that of normative Classical Sanskrit.

In this context, it is useful to return to Solomon’s observation that not only in the poetic portions

of earlier inscriptions from Mathurā but also in Rudradāman’s inscription, the type of Sanskrit use is that of the ‘preclassical literary style current among the literati of the day’, ‘the less formal epic-vernacular style in which some of the grammatical niceties of Pāṇinian/classical Sanskrit were not observed’ (90, emphases added); see the examples below. As Solomon’s use of the term “epic” suggests, this type of Sanskrit is characteristic of the epics, especially the Mahābhārata.¹ See the following examples, where a. illustrates influence of Prakrit phonology; b. a regional Prakrit variant pronunciation; c. a Prakritic morphological variant; and d. a difference in morphosyntax.

	Rudradāman	Classical Sanskrit	
a.	vīśad	viśad	‘20’
b.	pāī	pāī	‘tank’
c.	patināī	patyā	‘by the lord’
d.	anyatra saṅgrāmeṣu	anyatra saṅgrāmebhyaḥ	‘outside of battles’

Now, the fact that Pāṇini (6.2.38) refers to the Mahābhārata suggests that the epic tradition goes back to at least the 4th century BC, i.e. to late Vedic times. The epics themselves were originally handed down by bards at kings’ courts. Moreover, as is well known (and acknowledged in Pollock 2006: Chapter 6), the epics are foundational for Sanskrit culture in general and for literature specifically, especially the Mahābhārata which, in addition to telling the great tale of the Bhāratas as well as many other stories, also serves as a compendium of traditional wisdom (see the self-referential quotation below). Moreover, its stories serve as source material for much of later literature (e.g. Lienhard 1984: 31, 164, and elsewhere). Given this centrality of the epics in post-Vedic culture and literature, it is not surprising that features of Epic Sanskrit were employed by the poets of the early inscriptional praśastis and dedications, as well as by Aśvaghoṣa (2nd c. AD), the first known composer of a literary kāvya.

yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvat cit (MBh 1.56.33)

‘What is here is (also found) elsewhere, what is not here that (is) not (found) anywhere’

Toward an explanation, take two: The brahmins

Who, then, were the persons that composed and transmitted the epics?

While there has been disagreement on the role of (non-brahmin) sūtas in the early development of the great epics, there is no doubt that these texts increasingly became the province of brahmins (e.g. Brockington 1998: 18-22 on the Mahābhārata). Moreover, the testimony of the Mahābhārata shows that different versions were recited at royal courts (MBh 1.1.1-19). In fact, without some kind of royal patronage, it is unlikely that the epics could have been transmitted as successfully as they were. Moreover, for the epics to be handed down over the centuries there had to be an audience that knew enough Sanskrit to appreciate them, as well as bards that were competent to present them to that audience. That is, royal courts had to be proficient in Sanskrit language and poetic traditions.

While this provides a possible pathway through which a form of post-Vedic Sanskrit could have

provided a foundation for the expanded use of the language in the early centuries AD, it does not explain how and why Sanskrit spread through India, and further into Southeast Asia. It is here that Bronkhorst's publications provide interesting contributions.¹

Bronkhorst's thesis is that the spread of Sanskrit results from the spread of brahmanism or, more specifically, of brahmins. Evidence for this spread is found especially in Southeast Asia (Bronkhorst 2007/2010: 126-129), but there is also evidence from India; e.g. a Coḷa inscription 'claims that the founder of the ... dynasty, finding no Brahmins on the bank of the Kāverī, brought a large number of them from Āryāvarta and settled them there' (124, n. 11 with reference to Gopinath Rao 1926).

Bronkhorst argues that what motivated the spread of brahmins, and through them of Sanskrit, is that they offered skills and practices that rulers found to be useful and that, importantly, were not provided by the Buddhist tradition. These included secret knowledge, especially of magic spells, astrology, advice in matters of governance, and – relevant for Buddhists – ritual practices that met the need of the laypeople. See e.g. the following citations.

It appears, then, that the Buddhists were ready to concede that there were occupations that were best left to Brahmins. These occupations covered all forms of divination and the interpretation of signs. They also covered certain sciences, most notably mathematics and astronomy. To this I propose to add the art of giving professional advice to kings (2011: 109)

The list we have considered so far is no doubt not exhaustive. A complete list will be difficult to establish, given that there are no explicit statements in the [B]uddhist texts to the effect that this or that field of activity was left to Brahmins. To the list of items enumerated so far, it seems likely that at least one more can be added: the realm of rituals that accentuate major events in the life of an individual. Unlike Buddhism, Brahmanism had a whole series of these. (2011: 112)

Under these circumstances, the brahmins took over more and more spheres of language use so that, in effect, their language became the language of royal courts, or as von Hinüber puts it (2009: 168, cited on p. 209, n. 34), Sanskrit became the language of royal chanceries ['der Sprachgebrauch der Kanzleien der Herrscher']. As a consequence, Buddhists who wanted to defend their doctrine(s) against brahmins at the royal courts had to become proficient in Sanskrit. See the following citations and also see Eltschinger 2017.

[The] Buddhists had ceded the task of giving political and societal advice to Brahmins. The result was that political thought and its language of expression had become Sanskrit. What is more, Sanskrit had become the official court language. (2011: 127)

The result is known. Sometime during the second century CE the Buddhists of northwestern India shifted wholesale to Sanskrit. They did not do so because they liked Sanskrit, or because they liked the Brahmins whose language it was. Nor did they do so for some inherent quality that this language supposedly possesses. They did so because they needed to defend their interests at the royal courts in

Sanskrit ... (2011: 129)

Finally, Bronkhorst mentions the importance of the epics, śāstras, and fables:

Brahmins ... took their responsibility of giving practical counsel to rulers very seriously. They created a whole literature of a kind that one might designate “advice for kings” ... One way of doing so was presenting the example of earlier righteous kings. Scholars agree that this was one of the motives behind the composition of the great Sanskrit epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa ... There were also treatises containing more direct advice. The most important surviving text of this genre is the Arthaśāstra ... Another famous text ... is the ... Mānava Dharmaśāstra ... In brief, Brahmins made gigantic efforts to justify their positions at or around the royal courts. A complete list of further brahmanical works on politics would include the Tantrākhyāyika or Pañcatantra, long sections of Purāṇas, Kāmandaki’s Nītisāra, and much else. (2011: 39-40)

Toward an explanation, take 3: Education

Bronkhorst’s arguments go a long way toward explaining how Sanskrit spread. One element, however, is under-represented, namely the importance of brahmins – and Sanskrit – in the context of education.

The characteristics of traditional Vedic education are well known and are detailed in Scharfe 2018. Information regarding more secular aspects of education, by contrast, generally comes from more or less incidental textual references. Based on Scharfe, supplemented by Keay 1918, Altekar 1934, and Mookerji 1947, it is possible to gain a glimpse of what was being taught.

In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad the brahmin Janatkumāra declares the following:

ṛgvedaṃ bhagavo ’dhyemi yajurvedaṃ sāmavedaṃ ātharvaṇaṃ caturtham itihāsapurāṇaṃ
 pañcamaṃ vedānāṃ vedaṃ pitryaṃ rāṣiṃ daivaṃ nidhiṃ vākovākyaṃ ekāyanaṃ devavidyāṃ
 brahmavidyāṃ bhūtavidyāṃ kṣatravidyāṃ nakṣatravidyāṃ sarpadevajanaividyaṃ etad
 bhagavo ’dhyemi || ChU 7.1.2 ||

‘I know the Ṛgveda, Sir, the Yajurveda, the Sāmaveda, the Atharvaveda as the fourth, Itihāsa and Purāṇa as the fifth, the Veda of Vedas (i.e. grammar), ancestor worship, arithmetic, the science of omens, horology, debate, worldly wisdom, knowledge of the divine, knowledge of brahman, knowledge of demons, knowledge of weapons, knowledge of the constellations, knowledge of snakes, gods, and people; this, Sir, I know.’

And in the Mahābhārata the training of a king is said to include the following areas of study: 1

dhanurvede ca vede ca yatnaḥ kāryo narādhipa

hastiprṣṭhe 'śvapṛṣṭhe ca rathacaryāsu caiva ha || 13.107.138 ||

...

yuktiśāstraṃ ca te jñeyaṃ śabdaśāstraṃ ca bhārata
 gandharvaśāstraṃ ca kalāḥ parijñeyā narādhipa || 13.107.140 ||

purāṇam itihāsās ca tathākhyānāni yāni ca
 mahātmanām ca caritaṃ śrotavyaṃ nityam eva te || 13.107.141 ||

‘O king, (you) should make an effort in (the study) of the science of arms and of the Veda, and also of riding elephants and horses, and driving chariots ... You should know, O Bhārata, the science of reasoning and the science of words (i.e. grammar), the science of the Gandharvas and the divisions of time. You should always listen to the Purāṇas, Itihāsas and (other) narratives that exist, and to the stories of noble-spirited persons.’

Unfortunately, such passages generally do not provide any details on the instruction through which these areas of expertise are required. To my knowledge, the only passage that provides such information is the following, from Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra:1

vṛttacaulakarmā lipiṃ saṃkhyānam ca+upayujīta || 7 ||

vṛttopanayanas trayīm ānvīkṣikīm ca śiṣṭebhyo vārttām adhyakṣebhyo daṇḍanītiṃ
 vaktṛprayoktṛbhyaḥ || 8 ||

brahmacaryaṃ ca ṣoḍaśād varṣāt || 9 ||

ato godānam dārakarma ca+asya || 10 ||

nityaś ca vidyāvṛddhasamyogo vinayavṛddhyartham, tanmūlatvād vinayasya || 11 ||

pūrvam aharbhāgam hastyaśvarathapraharaṇavidyāsu vinayaṃ gacchet || 12 ||

paścimam itihāsaśravaṇe || 13 ||

purāṇam itivṛttam ākhyāyikodāharaṇam dharmāśāstram arthaśāstraṃ ca + iti + itihāsaḥ ||15||

...

‘After Tonsure, he should apply himself to writing and arithmetic; after Initiation, to (studying) the threefold Veda and philosophy from those who are learned, economics from (department) heads, and politics/justice from teachers and practioners. (He should observe) celibacy up to the 16th year; then (follows) the godāna (hair growing back) and marriage. And there should always be attachment to wise elders for the purpose of improving his conduct because conduct is rooted in this. In the first half of the day he should undergo instruction in the sciences of elephants, horses, chariots, and weapons. In the latter (half) studying itihāsa, (where) itihāsa is defined as purāṇas, historical accounts, tales and illustrative examples, dharmāśāstra, and

arthaśāstra ...’

Education in secular aspects, thus, is portrayed as an extension of Vedic education. The latter starts with the ceremony of Initiation, has the study of the Vedas as its goal (beginning of verse 8), requires brahmacarya ‘celibacy’ (v. 9), and ends with growing back one’s hair and marrying (v. 10). Secular education is added by introducing writing and arithmetic as a prerequisite (v. 7) and by merging philosophy, economics, and politics/justice into the traditional course of study (v. 8). Finally, something like “Continuing Education” includes mastery of topics not so far enumerated, including instruments of warfare (elephants, horses, chariots, weapons), history, and the study of dharmaśāstra and arthaśāstra (v. 11-15).

Now, Vedic education clearly was imparted in Sanskrit. Since the secular part of education is integrated into the Vedic curriculum and given the absence of references to other languages, the most likely conclusion is that the entire instructional system was in the medium of Sanskrit. Put differently, education required teachers and students to be or become proficient in Sanskrit. Scharfe, therefore, is probably right in comparing similar systems of traditional education in (early) modern India. Moreover, since instruction in the Vedas was normally imparted by brahmins, it is more than likely that the entire curriculum was under the tutelage of brahmins.

Evidence that this type of instruction was not limited to Hindus comes from the Buddhist Jātakas. Bronkhorst (2011: 159-160) gives a list of qualities of the ideal king by references to a various Sanskrit Jātakas, among which Viśāntarajātaka (p. 55, l. 4) and Sutasomajātaka (p. 208, l. 1) specifically mention mastery of the Vedas. Bronkhorst states that ‘this all-pervading brahmanical influence’ is not found in the ‘main surviving old collection of Jātakas, those in Pāli’. However, there are Pāli Jātakas in which future Bodhisattvas, both brahmin and kṣatriya, go to Takkaśila (Takṣaśila) to study with brahmins. Most important among these is the Bhīmasenajātaka (§3):¹

Atīte bārāṇasiyaṃ brahmadatte rajjaṃ kārente bodhisatto ekasmiṃ nigamaḡāme
 udiccabrāhmaṇakule nibbattitvā vayappatto Takkaśilāya disāpāṃokkhassa ācariyassa santike
 tayo vede aṭṭhārasa vijjaṭṭhānāni ... culladhanuggahapaṇḍito nāma ahoṣi

‘Long ago, when Brahmadata reignēd in Vārāṇasī, there was a Bodhisattva named Culladhanuggahapaṇḍita; born in a certain market-town in a northern brahmin family, when grown up he studied the three Vedas (and) the eighteen Sciences in Takkaśila, with a teacher of world-wide fame ...’

Brahmins, thus, played a significant role in education, and this role was not confined to “sacerdotal” topics but included (virtually) all areas of formal education. In fact, without the brahminical educational system, the spread of Sanskrit to non-brahmins, whether invaders (like the Kṣatrapas) or Buddhists and adherents of other “heterodox” religions, would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Moreover, since education was conducted in Sanskrit, it required at least a working knowledge of the language on the part of the students. The epic features of Sanskrit inscriptions up to the time of Rudradāman may suggest that initially some of the Sanskrit language employed was relatively informal, but the brahmins were guardians of the Pāṇinian grammatical tradition and therefore would provide instruction in grammar (see the citations from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad and the Mahābhārata). As the impact of the educational system grew, adherence to grammatically “correct” Sanskrit, therefore, would grow too. This, then, can account for the fact that by the time of the Guptas, some centuries after Rudradāman, the Sanskrit of praśastis, kāvyas, dramas, and the technical texts of the śāstras generally conforms to the norms of formal grammar.

Conclusions

Given the evidence for a long “this-worldly” tradition of Sanskrit literary use there is no need for postulating the creation of kāvyas and praśasti and of the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” ex nihilo. Rather, there was a slow expansion from earlier stages of Sanskrit linguistic and literary uses, at the expense of Prakrit, as shown in the inscriptions, with the eventual result that Sanskrit became dominant at royal courts, both as chancery and as literary language (as well as the language of grammar and other śāstras), and thus could serve as what Filliozat called a “link language”.

In this development, the influence of the great epics played an important role, to judge by what Solomon calls “epic-vernacular” style in the earliest attestations of inscriptional and literary Classical Sanskrit.

Another important factor was the role of brahmins, who provided services not covered by Buddhism, especially to royal patrons. Most important, their educational system required and thus facilitated the use of Sanskrit, and their expertise in traditional grammar stimulated an increasing use of grammatically “correct” Sanskrit.

Rudradāman and Aśvaghōṣa, with their epic-style Sanskrit, thus may be viewed, not as a radical new beginning, but as milestones in a continuing process of “Sanskritization” that culminated in the 4th and 5th centuries AD under the Guptas.

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