

Forgetting Prakrit

sakkaya vānī buhaana bhāvai
pāua rasa ko mamma na pāvai |
desila vayanā saba jana miṭṭhā
teṃ taisana jaṃpāü avahaṭṭhā ||

—VIDYĀPATI, *VINE OF GLORY (KĪRTILATĀ)*¹

SUMMARY

The previous chapters have examined Prakrit's position in the language order of India. I argued that Prakrit was not the endless stream of popular language: it referred to a specific set of language practices the beginnings of which we can locate, more or less, to the first century CE. It was around this time that a new kind of textuality emerged—*kāvya* or *kavva*—which was self-consciously expressive, in which the way something was said mattered just as much as what was said. This was a centuries-long process rather than a single historical event, and the impossibility of producing a precise time line has frustrated attempts to find a single “beginning” for the massive and diverse tradition of *kāvya*. Nevertheless, as chapters 2 and 3 have argued, the language practices of the Sātavāhana court had an enormous impact on the history of *kāvya* and on the shape of the classical language order. The inscriptions of the Sātavāhanas show that they created a language of power and were subsequently engaged in a long contest over what languages in particular would fulfill that role. They consistently, although not without exception, represented themselves in an expressive Middle Indic, and this language defined their cultural politics for centuries, even after their empire came to an end.

The literarization of political discourse we see in the inscriptions of the Sātavāhana era is contemporaneous with the emergence of a literary culture organized around the production and appreciation of *kāvya*. Although the connections between the two spheres remain elusive, the preferential use of one variety of Middle Indic in political discourse corresponds to the preferential use of another variety, Prakrit, in literary discourse. The Sātavāhana court had a major role in

establishing Prakrit as *the* language of this new type of literature, at least within the macroregion of the “Southern Path” that they laid claim to. And Prakrit, in turn, helped to establish *kāvya*, or *kavva*, as an independent domain of language use by demarcating it from learned discourse in other languages. Of course, we typically think of Sanskrit as the preeminent language of *kāvya*, even in its earliest days. I maintain, however, that we should think of Sanskrit as entering a discursive sphere that was already constituted by practices in other languages, foremost among them Prakrit. As a result of its entry into this new sphere, it was both for the first time in its already-long history defined as “Sanskrit” in opposition to Prakrit and transformed into a language of expressive literature that was not necessarily linked to a particular religious tradition—a language, in other words, like Prakrit.

My argument in chapters 2 and 3 is that the “literarization” of various forms of discourse that took place around the first century CE—a process that many scholars have noticed, although Sheldon Pollock is one of the few to have named it and suggested an explanation for it—is inextricable from their “Prakritization.” I do not mean that preexisting discourses were “translated” into Prakrit. On the contrary: the forms of textuality that emerged in this period were largely Prakrit forms to begin with. When Bhadrabāhu composes versified notes to the Jain canon, he uses Prakrit *gāthās*, and he is one of the first in the Jain tradition to do so. When Nāgārjuna, who is reputed to have enjoyed the patronage of the Sātavāhanas, composes Buddhist philosophical works in Sanskrit *āryās*, he is using a verse form that originated in Prakrit literature. And above all, it is Prakrit literature that defines a large part—although certainly not the whole—of what it means for *kavva/kāvya* to be “courtly” literature: not simply produced at the court, but embodying a refined courtly aesthetic and operating through indirection, obliquity, and suggestion. The positive features of Prakrit literature—what it meant, on the level of phonemes, verse forms, and compositional forms, for a text to be a Prakrit text—have been explored in chapter 4.

Seven Centuries, a product of the Sātavāhana court, is rightly seen as one of the foundational texts of this literary tradition. I argued in chapter 3 that previously overlooked Jain texts like Pālitta’s *Taraṅgavatī* are just as critical for understanding its history. The texts that survive are sufficient to establish that Jain authors made contributions to the burgeoning literary culture of the early centuries CE that were no less significant than the cultivation of Sanskrit literary forms by Buddhist authors such as Aśvaghoṣa and Kumāralāta. And although these texts are often shunted off into a separate tradition of “Jain Prakrit” or “Jain Māhārāṣṭrī,” we would do better to think of a wider field of textuality that accommodates them alongside their Sanskrit and Prakrit intertexts. In chapter 6, against the common conception that views Jain Prakrit as an exception to the grammatical norms of Prakrit, I suggested that Jain texts may actually have been the grammatical norm.

The dichotomy of Sanskrit and Prakrit is one of the focal points of chapter 5, which surveys the various ways in which Prakrit was figured. I argue there that the representations of Prakrit should be seen as schemas, in the technical sense that they bring a variety of literary language practices to order by determining their relative position in an overarching system of representations. Sanskrit and Prakrit, which come to be used as names of complementary language practices at around the same time, are figured as identical but opposite, and co-constitutive of the whole of textuality. These representations determine Prakrit as a completely different kind of language than we are used to. It is like Sanskrit, in that it is effectively transregional, the primary language of a tradition of sophisticated and courtly literature, and cultivated by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains alike; it is nevertheless regional in some significant sense, the language in which low and uneducated people are represented as speaking, and relatively circumscribed and minor in relation to Sanskrit. But this very minority makes it a useful indicator of the structures in which it is embedded: Prakrit poets, for example, almost always reflect on their choice of language in a way that Sanskrit poets rarely do. And insofar as it reveals the structures on which literary languages depend for their being and for their being-known—regimes of representation, of systematic knowledge, of discipline and practice—Prakrit gives us a crucial starting point for thinking about literary languages in general, in India and elsewhere.

Chapter 6 examines some of the forms of systematic knowledge that constituted Prakrit in greater conceptual and historical detail. Prakrit grammar is often treated as though it were an unsophisticated adaptation of Sanskrit grammar, but such an approach overlooks the important cultural work that Prakrit grammar performed, which was qualitatively different from the work of Sanskrit grammar. I offer a reading of the organizing concepts of Prakrit grammar and lexicography, and to a lesser extent Prakrit metrics, as the instruments of an unprecedented project of large-scale comparison between language practices. These forms of knowledge help us to understand what it meant for Prakrit to be “regional.” It is the remainder of this comparison, but also its principal object; the regional is what knowledge of Prakrit is really knowledge of. With the first fully articulated theory of the regional in India, Prakrit discourses give regional-language discourses a way of understanding themselves in relation to Sanskrit, as we have seen in the case of the earliest grammars of Kannada and Telugu.

REORDERING LANGUAGE

“Those who know how to recite Prakrit poetry,” says a verse that appears for the first time around the twelfth century, “are as rare as those who know how to make garlands of *kubja* flowers, or how to pacify a woman’s wrath.”² This verse harkens back to Prakrit’s “declaration of independence” (W2, discussed in chapter 3) about

a thousand years prior, but at the same time registers a new sense of Prakrit's rarity: not just of the practice of reciting it, but of the knowledge that skilled recitation depends on. This chapter will examine the transformations that Prakrit underwent that might underlie this sense of rarity. For something must have changed. Prakrit was an essential component of literary culture in the first millennium, with a corpus of texts that poets actively contributed to and that theorists actively engaged with. Over the course of the second millennium, however, textual production in Prakrit seems to decrease, the language becomes increasingly confined to Jain scholars, and generally Prakrit was much less important for thinking about the literary than it had been previously.

A contraction in three areas—textual production in the language, its public, and its significance—appears to diagnose a “decline.” But that is not exactly the story I want to tell in this chapter. Decline narratives are always susceptible to a number of criticisms. One is their evidentiary basis. Especially in the case of Prakrit literary practices, with so many texts lost and quite a few still awaiting publication, it might seem imprudent and arbitrary to compare what is known of one period to what is known of another. A second criticism relates to interpretation. Does *Rāma pañivādaś*'s production of two long poems in Prakrit in the early eighteenth century constitute an exception to a general pattern of decline, for example, or should it prevent us from speaking of decline in the first place? And how in principle should we decide between these options? These questions involve a third criticism, which is teleology. The teleology might be on the level of historical narration, where phenomena are selected and organized according to their eventual decline, or it might be on the level of explanation, where phenomena are said to already contain in themselves the seeds of their inevitable decline. Although both kinds are defensible, defending them requires a commitment to a model of historiography or to a theory of history that we might not be prepared to make. We might wonder, instead, whether there are other ways of narrating what happened to Prakrit over the course of the second millennium than through the motif of decline.

There are additional liabilities in attempting to fit Prakrit into a narrative of decline. Decline might be gauged by the rarity, obscurity, or marginality of a phenomenon that was once abundant, prominent, and central. But Prakrit was always a “minor” literature in comparison to Sanskrit, and this difference was not accidental but constitutive. Even authors who treated Prakrit as a popular and widely accessible language nevertheless tended to present it as being *faute de mieux* for readers who lacked Sanskrit—and even those authors, as we have seen, usually went on to compose in Sanskrit anyway.³

Applying a decline narrative to Prakrit might thus lead to the self-contradictory view that it was *always* in decline. Yet this is precisely how the history of Prakrit is often narrated. Decline narratives force us to think about languages and

literary traditions in vitalist terms, namely, as “dead” or “alive.” As naturalized as these terms may be for us, their original use—and still their most common use—is to denigrate older literary traditions in favor of newer ones.⁴ The vitalist metaphor also underwrites a certain historiography of Prakrit that I discussed in the introduction: the whole history of Prakrit textuality, on this view, is merely the afterlife—or perhaps the long-drawn-out death—following a hypothetical period of vitality that predates our textual sources. In the beginning was Prakrit storytelling and song, and writing turned it into a dead letter, a game for over-educated elites.⁵

The historiography of death and decline thus may not be the best way to come to terms with what actually happened to Prakrit over the course of the second millennium. In what follows, I will attempt to relate these changes—for they were indeed changes—to a reconfiguration of the language order: the transregional language order of which Prakrit formed a critical part, and which extended all over South Asia, but was succeeded by regional language orders in which Prakrit was replaced, redetermined, or otherwise pushed to the margins. Prakrit did remain an essential component of the literary-cultural knowledge that educated people were expected to master, but the purposes and actual uses of this knowledge were much different in what Sheldon Pollock has called the “vernacular millennium” than they had been previously.⁶

Thus I will be arguing that Prakrit was deeply affected by the regionalization of culture and politics that occurred at the beginning of the “vernacular millennium,” that is, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Because the history of Prakrit is the history of the language order in which it is contained, I find the ecological metaphor developed by Shantanu Phukan more compelling than the metaphors of language life and death. We cannot say that Prakrit occupied the same “niche” that the vernacular languages would later occupy. The ecological metaphor allows us, however, to go beyond the functionalism according to which already-existing languages are matched with already-existing purposes, toward a model in which the languages and purposes themselves depend on a larger configuration of literary practices—the “intricate inter-dependencies and rivalries . . . of literary communities,” as Phukan says.⁷

Since Prakrit was both notionally regional and effectively transregional, it is at first unclear what we should expect the effects of the regionalization of culture on it to have been. And in fact, there were a wide variety of such effects—not all of which can be unambiguously characterized as “decline”—and this variety ultimately resulted in the concept of “Prakrit” losing much of its definition and coherence. Probably in response to these “centrifugal” energies, a considerable number of grammars and commentaries were composed between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries that synthesize, reorganize, and rearticulate what was known of Prakrit.

This chapter will first chart the ways in which Prakrit was edged out of the language order even while it retained, at least in some places, a notional place among the “six languages.” The different processes of displacement provide a valuable perspective on the different processes of transculturation that are now often lumped together under the term “vernacularization.” It is well known that Dravidian-speaking South India vernacularized much differently than the Indic-speaking North, and I argue that Prakrit must play a crucial role in explaining this difference.⁸ The chapter will then examine the “centripetal” forces that reconstituted Prakrit as an object of knowledge, or rather as an object of locally differentiated knowledges: for in a very few cases, knowledge of Prakrit remained crucially important to the continuation of local traditions of devotion or performance; in other cases, it symbolized one’s total mastery over the field of linguistic science; in most cases, it was the arcane science of a mostly forgotten literary past. The last section of the chapter returns to the theme of displacement and examines the transformation of Prakrit into the language of the snakes.

DISPLACEMENT

Prakrit once had a “place” in the language order of classical India. In the schemas that defined and regulated language practices, and especially literary language practices, Prakrit was situated alongside Sanskrit and Apabhramsha. Prakrit also had a “place” in the language practices themselves, populating the discursive worlds that these schemas brought to order. When I speak of “displacement,” then, I mean Prakrit’s displacement from a position of importance both in actual practices and in the conceptual ordering of these practices. I also mean to imply that Prakrit’s place was taken by something else: some of Prakrit’s functions were taken over by Sanskrit, while others were taken over by vernacular languages.

An example of Prakrit’s placement will help us to understand what exactly it means for Prakrit to have been displaced. Around the beginning of the eleventh century CE, the Paramāra king Bhoja had a pair of poems in Prakrit, each about a hundred verses long, inscribed on the walls of a building that would later be known as the Bhojaśālā in his capital of Dhārā in today’s Madhya Pradesh.⁹ The first poem praises Kūrma, the tortoise that supports the earth on its shell. The second praises Bhoja for outdoing Kūrma in the task of supporting the earth. In these inscriptions we have, uniquely, the clear expression of a political vision in Prakrit poetry that is about and attributed to a reigning king. These poems, mediocre as their editor judged them to be, demonstrate the highly visible “place” of Prakrit in one of the most powerful and most storied courts of India. Prakrit was accorded this place by virtue of its status as a literary language—indeed, as an exclusively literary language—and not by virtue of its notional connection with any particular region, community, or religious tradition. And hence these poems also

demonstrate the prominent role that literature and its practices were accorded in imagining the political. The prominent place of Prakrit in the physical space of Bhoja's capital merely confirms what is obvious from reading the king's literary-critical works, *Necklace of Sarasvatī* and *Illumination of the Erotic*, which together quote about two thousand Prakrit verses.¹⁰

The pair of poems at Dhārā is one of the very few instances of inscribed Prakrit poetry—as distinct from the Middle Indic that the Śātavāhanas employed in their inscribed poetry of politics—and most of the other examples are also from Dhārā.¹¹ Bhoja is also one of the last kings to patronize Prakrit poets, or perhaps one of the last kings for whom there were any Prakrit poets to patronize.¹² As a rule Prakrit, which entered history as a language of courtly literature and retained that status until Bhoja's time, was exiled from royal courts throughout the second millennium. There are exceptions, but as I will suggest below, these exceptions make the use of Prakrit part of a fantasy of a literary past.

The classical schema of “six languages,” which Bhoja himself had adopted in his *Illumination of the Erotic*, remained the primary way in which authors and theorists crystallized the unending variety of language into a conceptually ordered set of literary possibilities. But as noted in chapter 5, underlying any such representation is a schema of co-figuration that defines languages in contrast to each other. For the classical language order, Sanskrit and Prakrit were the basic terms of co-figuration; Apabhramsha was a further iteration of Prakrit's differences, and Māgadhī and Śaurasenī were dramatic ectypes of Prakrit. Even an Apabhramsha poet such as Svayambhū (ninth century), when reflecting on the great river that is the story of Rāma, observed that Sanskrit and Prakrit were its two banks.

THE NEW DUALITY

Vernacularization fundamentally changed the schema of co-figuration. In region after region of southern Asia, starting in the ninth century, the dichotomy of Sanskrit and Prakrit was replaced by the dichotomy of Sanskrit and the regional vernacular. As shown in chapter 5, Prakrit provided the concepts through which vernacular language practices were theorized: lexemes could be Sanskrit-identical, Sanskrit-derived, or regional. Prakrit's two systems of versification, syllable-counting and mora-counting, likewise set a precedent for the introduction of regional versification practices into the higher forms of literary culture. I do not mean that the study of Prakrit literature somehow “inspired” vernacularization, but that when the will to “literarize” the regional languages appeared, Prakrit provided some of the key theoretical tools for doing so.

This model sheds some light on the difficult question of how the agents of vernacularization understood their own language practices. Sheldon Pollock has

argued that the vernaculars were never (with a handful of exceptions) considered “Prakrits,” since Prakrit was essentially a component of the cosmopolitan culture in contrast to which the vernaculars defined themselves; Herman Tieken has argued, in contrast, that “Prakrits” are precisely what the vernaculars were understood to be, since Prakrit was essentially a representation of local speech in a literary register.¹³ Under the schema of co-figuration, however, a language might be thought of as “Prakrit” not because it was functionally (or still less grammatically) similar to Prakrit, but just because it was Sanskrit’s other.

The examples of the vernacular being called Prakrit that Tieken has extracted from Pollock’s book are important, but not for the reasons Tieken thinks. The first example is an inscription of 699 CE, which contains a date in Sanskrit and presents the details of a grant in Kannada, and notes in the Sanskrit portion that the Kannada portion is “in the Prakrit language.”¹⁴ Second, there is the widespread use of the word *prākṛta* in Java to refer to the language we would call Old Javanese, a usage that seems as old as Old Javanese literature itself (see chapter 6). Lastly, there is the statement of the seventeenth-century poet Ākḥo that “Sanskrit is of no use without Prakrit,” by which he means his own Gujarati language.¹⁵ These examples hardly suffice to establish that the vernaculars were, as a rule, thought of as Prakrit, although this was probably the case in Java. More important, they all involve a contrast with Sanskrit. Thus they attest to an idea of “Prakrit” as a counterpart to Sanskrit that was much more deeply entrenched than the actual practices of Prakrit literature. Not coincidentally, these practices are nowhere in evidence in any of these examples, which suggests that in them the vernacular is not figured as one “Prakrit” among many, but as the only possible alternative to Sanskrit within the textual cultures in which they were produced.

As I noted above, we need to be sensitive to the very different trajectories of vernacularization in different regions of South Asia, and we can use the representation of Prakrit to trace some of these differences. Kannada and Telugu literature, to begin with, have a topos of the “both-poet.” In a passage from the later tenth-century *Ocean of Meters*, discussed in chapter 6, Nāgavarman refers to metrical forms found “in all domains” of “both languages” (*ubhayabhāṣā*), evidently meaning Sanskrit and Prakrit, since Nāgavarman contrasts them with the Kannada language and its particular metrical forms. But in several other examples, “both” refers to Sanskrit and Kannada. The poet Ponna, famous for composing the *Legend of Śāntinātha* in Kannada, was given the title “emperor among both-poets” (*ubhaya-kavi-cakravartin*) by the Rāṣtrakūṭa king Kṛṣṇa III (r. 939–968), which the poet explicitly tells us was for his skill in both Sanskrit and Kannada. Ranna, author of the *Legend of Ajitanātha* in Kannada who worked under the Cālukya king Tailapa II (r. 973–997), would also style himself a “both-poet” (*ubhayakavi*). One further example comes from Telugu literature. The second of the “trinity” of poets who rendered the *Mahābhārata* into Telugu

is the thirteenth-century poet Tikkana, who is described by his contemporary Ketana in the latter's *Ornament of the Āndhra Language* as a "friend of both-poets" (*ubhayakavimitru*).¹⁶ In fact, none of these poets composed any works in Sanskrit that we know of. Yet the title "both-poet" refers to the capacity to compose in Sanskrit and in the vernacular, or at least the capacity to compose in the vernacular in a highly Sanskritic style. None of these poets wrote a word of Prakrit as far as we know.

From the later history of Kannada and Telugu, one could hardly figure out that a language called Prakrit even existed. The Vīraśaiva movement presented itself, and its language practices, as radically opposite to Sanskrit. Pāṅkuriki Somanātha, for example, opposes Sanskrit to Telugu as coconut to honey.¹⁷ Peddana's *Deeds of Manu* begins with a praise of earlier poets, with the Sanskrit poets in one group and the Telugu poets in another.¹⁸ The cultural logic is similar to that of inscriptional discourse in the first century CE (chapter 2): being recognized as a language means being recognized as different from another language, and as a result language practices tend to cluster around binary oppositions.

Whereas vernacular traditions of the South replaced Prakrit with the regional language in the schemas that ordered their literary practices, those of the North generally continued to employ the three-way contrast between Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramsha. Bhoja knew of a *Bhīma Kāvya* that he described as composed in a "vulgar language" (*grāmyabhāṣā*); tellingly, Hemacandra recasts this phrase as "vulgar Apabhramsha" (*grāmyāpabhramśa*), a phrase that simultaneously identifies the language with Apabhramsha and also registers some differences from it.¹⁹ As noted in chapters 5 and 6, Apabhramsha was configured as the last stop on a derivational path that started from Sanskrit, and over the centuries, regional varieties of Apabhramsha began to develop and shade into what we think of as modern vernaculars.²⁰

What I want to emphasize here is that as Apabhramsha was pulled closer to the vernacular practices of the North, its distance from Prakrit increased. For some poets, of course, Prakrit and Apabhramsha—even this newer, regionalized Apabhramsha—remained mutually constitutive. This was true of 'Abd ur-Raḥmān, the thirteenth-century author of a *Message Poem* in Apabhramsha, who identified himself as a Prakrit poet. But the verse of Vidyāpati (fourteenth/fifteenth-century Mithilā) quoted at the beginning of this chapter marks an ongoing and intentional displacement of Prakrit from the practices of literature. R. S. McGregor translated Vidyāpati's *pāua rasa ko mamma na pāvai* as "who does not grasp and relish natural speech?"²¹ On this interpretation, Vidyāpati may be associating his language, Avahaṭṭha, with "natural speech" as signified by the word "Prakrit" (*pāua*). I prefer another translation, suggested by Tsuyoshi Nara: "nobody can understand the complexities of the *rasa* of Prakrit."²² Vidyāpati recognizes Prakrit but assigns it no sphere of practice: the learned prefer Sanskrit, he says, and everyone enjoys

the vernacular, which his own “Avahaṭṭha” approximates; the mysteries of Prakrit, however, are known to no one.²³

TRANSLATION AND ABRIDGMENT

The Kannada poet Ponna claimed in the tenth century that the “poets who professed to write in the three and a half languages” stole all of their material from other poets.²⁴ After Ponna’s time, however, poets in South India largely gave up whatever pretense they had of writing in Prakrit. If poets were concerned with Prakrit literature at all, rather than adding to it, they were concerned to adapt it to the new conditions of the vernacular millennium.

Two complementary examples of this kind of adaptation come from the Reḍḍi court of coastal Andhra around the turn of the fifteenth century. Pedakomaṭi Vema Reḍḍi or Vema Bhūpāla (r. 1403–1420) produced an *Essence of the Seven Centuries*, a selection of around one hundred verses from the original *Seven Centuries* of Hāla, with Vema’s own commentary, featuring a word-for-word rendering of each verse into Sanskrit (a *chāyā* or “shadow”).²⁵ Vema might have gotten the idea of abridging and translating *Seven Centuries* from one of the poets in his court. The famously learned and productive Śrīnātha is said to have translated *Seven Centuries* into Telugu toward the beginning of his career, but the text is now lost.²⁶

In both cases, it was important to the authors to appropriate the courtly aesthetic of *Seven Centuries*, but doing so required transposing it into either Sanskrit or Telugu. Vema tells us, at the beginning of the *Essence*, that “he is that very Hāla.”²⁷ Let us take up his invitation and compare the two kings. Vema’s *Essence* is an abridgment of an earlier anthology; none of the poems in it—with the possible but unlikely exception of a handful of verses not found in other recensions of *Seven Centuries*—were composed by Vema or any of his court poets. Vema did live up to Hāla’s ideal by generously supporting poets and scholars like Śrīnātha. But not a single one of these poets wrote in Prakrit.

These transcreations of *Seven Centuries* at the Reḍḍi court invite comparison with Govardhana’s *Seven Centuries of Āryās*, produced at the court of Lakṣmaṇasena around 1200 CE. Govardhana’s explicit goal was to “turn poetry whose *rasa* is most appropriate for Prakrit into Sanskrit,” as the verse quoted in chapter 5 says. Although Govardhana’s anthology is much more learned, allusive, and sophisticated than Hāla’s, its playfulness and frankness—the *rasa* of Prakrit poetry—represent a departure from earlier traditions of lyric poetry in Sanskrit. Prakrit served a purpose in the Sena court, but as in the Reḍḍi court, that purpose was to supply an aesthetic ideal that could be creatively appropriated by poets working in other languages, and who would indeed redefine what it meant to write courtly literature in Sanskrit (in the case of Govardhana) or Telugu (in the case of Śrīnātha).

Even within the community of Jain monks, who took a special interest in Prakrit because of the vast religious literature in it, translation was one of the conditions for its survival in the vernacular millennium. Up until the turn of the thirteenth century, the Jain communities of North India produced an incredible volume of narrative literature in Prakrit, which remains largely unstudied to this day. After the first few decades of the thirteenth century, however, there is a precipitous decline in textual production in Prakrit and Apabhramsha.²⁸ The downturn is very nearly contemporaneous with the appearance of a rich literature in what scholars call “Old Gujarati” or “Mārū-Gūrjar,” the earliest surviving examples of which are the tales of the battle between Bharateśvara and Bāhubali composed by the Jain monks Vajrasena Sūri (ca. 1170) and Śālibhadra Sūri (1185).²⁹

The downturn in original writing in Prakrit also coincides with a remarkable effort to translate the important works of Prakrit literature into Sanskrit. There is a pattern in thirteenth-century literary production that strongly suggests that the stream of Prakrit was being systematically diverted into Sanskrit, on the one hand, and a rapidly regionalizing variety of Apabhramsha, on the other.

John Cort has drawn on Mahopadhyāya Vinayasāgara’s research to sketch a “writer’s workshop” in the Kharatara Gaccha centered around Jineśvara Sūri and his students, who revised and corrected each others’ work.³⁰ Jineśvara Sūri himself (1189–1275) produced works in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhramsha, and the vernacular, but it seems significant that he added a Sanskrit autocommentary to his biography of Candraprabha in Prakrit prose. His students rarely wrote in Prakrit, and Cort notes that this sets Jineśvara’s circle apart from earlier literary circles. One of his students was Jinaratna Sūri, who wrote exclusively in Sanskrit. His first major work was a history of the four “self-enlightened” Jinas (1255), which probably takes its starting point from Śrītilaka Sūri’s Prakrit work on the same subject (1205). His last work, completed in 1285, is an abridgment and translation into Sanskrit of a long narrative called *A Story of Liberation and Līlāvati* (*Nivvāṇalīlāvai*, now lost), which was in turn composed by the “first” Jineśvara Sūri, founder of the Kharatara Gaccha, in 1036. In the introduction to the text he claims to be producing his epitome for reasons of spiritual advancement, and that some people will be interested in “just the story” (*kathāmātra*) without the literary embellishment of the original. Jinaratna justifies his decision to epitomize an earlier text by referring to “epitomes of the *Tilakamañjarī* and so on.”³¹ The reference to Dhanapālā’s *Tilakamañjarī*, which was written in Sanskrit, obscures the fact that Jinaratna’s text, besides being an abridgment, is a translation.

Exactly at the same time that Jinaratna was reworking *A Story of Liberation and Līlāvati* into Sanskrit, a number of monks belonging to the Candra Gaccha were doing the same to other works of Prakrit literature. In the middle of the thirteenth century, Ratnaprabha Sūri made a Sanskrit *campū* out of Uddyotana Sūri’s Prakrit *Kuvalayamālā*. In 1265, Munideva created a Sanskrit epitome of

Devacandra's Prakrit *Deeds of Śāntinātha*. And in 1268, Pradyumna Sūri created a Sanskrit epitome of Haribhadra Sūri's *Story of Samarāditya*. Pradyumna had actually edited Ratnaprabha's and Munideva's epitomes, and made corrections to some Prakrit manuscripts currently kept in Jaisalmer. This activity even more clearly represents a program of translation and abridgment, and as Christine Chojnacki has pointed out, the formal features these works share (e.g., the reduction of the text to about a third of its original extent) suggest that the authors were following a rubric.³² And although Sanskrit works were also epitomized as part of this program—Dhanapāla's *Tilakamañjarī*, which Jinaratna mentioned, and Siddharṣi's *Endless Stream of Likenesses and Births*—the goal was evidently to make the important literary works of the past available to a thirteenth-century readership whose interest was primarily in spiritual edification, and whose knowledge of Prakrit was limited at best. The project continued into the fourteenth century, when Dharmacandra made a Sanskrit epitome of the Prakrit *Story of Malayavati*.³³

Similar to these transcreations, but probably somewhat earlier, is the abridgment of Pālitta's *Taraṅgavati* into *Taraṅgalolā*. As we saw in chapter 3, the redactor acknowledges the difficulty that most people experienced in reading Prakrit texts—especially in understanding their regional vocabulary—as the primary reason for creating *Taraṅgalolā*.

This selection from the domain of literature is more or less representative of textual production as a whole. Nemicandra's *Essence for Gommaṭa*, composed for the Gaṅga minister Cāmuṅḍa Rāya in the later tenth century, is one of the last major works of Digambara Jain doctrine to be written in Prakrit. Cāmuṅḍa Rāya was himself a writer of Kannada, and patronized such eminent Kannada authors as Ranna and Nāgavarman. In subsequent centuries, most of the important Prakrit works of the Digambara Jains, including *Essence for Gommaṭa*, would be translated into Sanskrit and Kannada, or have Sanskrit and Kannada commentaries written on them. And this process was by no means limited to South India: John Cort has shown how Digambara communities in North India, and above all in eighteenth-century Agra, made an industry out of vernacularizing doctrinal works that were originally composed in Prakrit.³⁴

These diverse processes of displacement, abridgment and translation all point to the precarious position that Prakrit had going into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although nearly everyone continued to enumerate Prakrit among the three, four, six, or eight languages of Indian literary culture, its existence was increasingly notional. Literary production shifted from Prakrit to Sanskrit and the vernaculars: evidence for this comes from the Sanskritization or vernacularization of Prakrit texts, first of all, but also from the relative paucity of Prakrit texts after the thirteenth century. These new patterns of literary production corroborate a conceptual realignment: over the course of the vernacular millennium, the

organizing dichotomy of the language order was increasingly not Sanskrit/Prakrit but Sanskrit/Vernacular, as attested by the topos of the “both-poet.”

Yet knowledge of Prakrit, which Rājaśekhara considered a *conditio sine qua non* for poets in the early tenth century, cannot be said to have unequivocally gone into decline. Although some eleventh-century authors like Bhoja seem to have taken it for granted that their readers would be able to understand Prakrit, others—notably Abhinavagupta and his student Kṣemendra—consistently did their readers the favor of providing a Sanskrit gloss of Prakrit verses in their literary-critical works.³⁵ The translation efforts of Pradyumna Sūri and his circle suggest that there was a small and probably shrinking group of Prakrit experts in the thirteenth century who wrote for an educated public of Jain monks who could hardly understand Prakrit at all. And over the next several centuries, Prakrit knowledge would become expert knowledge even more than it had been in the past.

RESUSCITATION

One of the most careful and comprehensive works of Prakrit grammar is a commentary on Vararuci’s *Light on Prakrit* by Vasantarāja, which was probably composed in the later eleventh century.³⁶ Vasantarāja named his commentary *Resuscitation of Prakrit (Prākṛtasamjivani)*, tacitly recognizing that Prakrit was being displaced from the language order of India. But just what did Vasantarāja aim to resuscitate? Over the remaining course of the vernacular millennium, that is, from the twelfth century to the early eighteenth, we find a profusion of texts like the *Resuscitation* which reorganize, refashion, and explain the rules of Prakrit grammar as they were formulated by Vararuci and Hemacandra. Many of these texts were produced at important centers of political and intellectual power, and some were produced by the most learned scholars of their age.

Let us look at four examples. Lakṣmīdhara composed *Moonlight of the Six Languages* around the middle of the sixteenth century. He seems to have enjoyed some support from the kings of Vijayanagara, the most powerful polity in South India at the time.³⁷ *Moonlight* is simply a rearrangement of the Prakrit grammar of Trivikrama. And Trivikrama’s grammar itself, composed in the early thirteenth century, is largely a rearrangement and expansion of Hemacandra’s definitive grammar of Prakrit, presented in the last chapter of his *Siddhahemacandra*. The same applies to *Exposition of the Six Languages* by Bālasarasvatī, a Telugu scholar who lived at the turn of the seventeenth century, which also rearranges the grammar of Trivikrama. The third example is Śeṣa Kṛṣṇa, a Vārāṇasī-based intellectual active in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Śeṣa was the foremost grammarian of his time, and he is best known today as the teacher of the famous grammarian Bhaṭṭoji Dikṣita.³⁸ He is the author of *Moonlight of Prakrit*, which is largely a versification of Trivikrama’s and Hemacandra’s rules (the commentary borrows

wholesale from these two authors) but includes a number of other citations indicative of his wide reading. Śeṣa wrote it after his *Moonlight of Words*, a versified grammar of Sanskrit.³⁹ With the final example, we return from Vārāṇasī back to South India, and specifically to the Nāyaka kingdom of seventeenth-century Maturai. There Appayya Dikṣita III, the grand-nephew of his famous namesake, produced a work titled *Jewel-Lamp of Prakrit*.⁴⁰ Appayya refers to Hemacandra, Trivikrama, and Lakṣmīdhara, among others, but his *Jewel-Lamp* is essentially an abridgment of Trivikrama's grammar. Appayya's text was evidently meant to be used alongside Trivikrama's, since his abridgments render the grammar incoherent on its own.

All of these three authors, living within about a century of each other, produced Prakrit grammars, but did so by rearranging, versifying, or abridging previous grammars. The only one to actually write Prakrit that we know of is Śeṣa Kṛṣṇa, who uses it as a secondary language in plays such as *Kaṃsa's Demise*. These authors all avow that their goal is to make Prakrit easier for students to learn. But why was it important for students to learn Prakrit in the vernacular millennium anyway, when the sphere of Prakrit literature had basically contracted to the women's parts in Sanskrit plays?

Prakrit seems to have taken on a symbolic significance as the capstone of cosmopolitan language practices that was only enhanced by its late-medieval rarity and marginality. Although regional literary cultures were increasingly oriented toward "the two languages," some intellectuals held themselves to the higher standard of proficiency in "all languages," which includes Prakrit in all of its theatrical varieties. Prakrit, even if it was used only occasionally, was still indispensable for writing plays on the model of Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, and Rājaśekhara. And it was, of course, equally indispensable for reading the classical works of Sanskrit drama.

There were several ways of demonstrating this proficiency. Two authors of Kerala, Līlāśuka and Rāma Pāṇivāda, composed devotional poems in Prakrit about Kṛṣṇa. Līlāśuka's *Poem of Cihna*, composed around 1300, is a *śāstra-kāvya*, exemplifying Vararuci's rules for Prakrit much as Bhaṭṭi exemplified Pāṇini's rules for Sanskrit. Rāma Pāṇivāda's two epic poems, *Kaṃsa's Demise* and *Uṣā and Aniruddha*, written in the eighteenth century, are not explicitly *śāstra-kāvya*s. But Rāma Pāṇivāda did write a commentary to Vararuci's grammar, and his two Prakrit poems can easily be seen as an attempt to put this grammatical knowledge to use.

Other authors demonstrated their proficiency in "all languages" by vying with Rājaśekhara, the dramatist who was one of the first poets to claim to be "omnilingual" and to hold this forth as an ideal for other poets. Rājaśekhara employed Prakrit extensively in his play *The Pierced Statue*, but later decided that he would go one step further and produce a play entirely in Prakrit. This play was

Karpūramañjarī, which is the earliest surviving representative, if not the earliest work altogether, of the genre of *saṭṭaka*. The *saṭṭaka* is a romantic comedy in which all of the characters speak Prakrit; it is filled with song, dance, witty repartee, and soft-core eroticism.

A handful of poets tried to outdo, or at least redo, *Karpūramañjarī* with *saṭṭakas* of their own. These plays, and the specifics of their debt to *Karpūramañjarī*, are well known and need not be discussed here at length.⁴¹ The earliest is the fifteenth-century *Rambhāmañjarī* of Nayacandra Sūri, a Jain monk whose other major work, the *Poem of Hammīra*, narrates the battle between the Cāhamāna prince Hammīra and ‘Alā‘uddīn Khilji in 1301. *Rambhāmañjarī* is also set in the heroic past, and its hero, Jaitracandra, is clearly modeled on the Gāhaḍavāla king Jayacandra of Vārāṇasī, fabled enemy of Pṛthvīrāja Cāhamāna (later twelfth century).⁴² *Rambhāmañjarī* is about the king’s infatuation with the young Rambhā; since their marriage is secured already in the first act, the second and third acts are entirely given over to love games and love songs. There is no hint that Jaitracandra will be betrayed by his wife and end up dead in the Yamunā river, as other sources tell us.

Rudradāsa wrote a *saṭṭaka* called *Candralekhā* for Mānaveda II of Calicut (ca. 1660), which its editor, A. N. Upadhye, did not appreciate very highly.⁴³ Around the same time, in the court of Mukuṇḍadeva of Orissa, Mārkaṇḍeya wrote a *saṭṭaka* called *Vilāsavatī*, which he referred to in his Prakrit grammar (*Sum-Total of Prakrit*), but which is now lost. In the early eighteenth century, Viśveśvara of Almora produced a large number of literary works, among them a *saṭṭaka* called *Śṛṅgāramañjarī*. The last *saṭṭaka* is the *Ānandasundarī* of Ghanaśyāma, the minister of Tukkojī of Tañcāvūr (r. 1729–1735).

Ghanaśyāma’s *Ānandasundarī* makes it clear that the whole enterprise of producing *saṭṭakas* is a form of applied philology. The composition of a *saṭṭaka* is an ostentatious performance of a certain kind of philological knowledge, namely, the knowledge of literary Prakrit, which had become rare, and hence valuable, over the course of the vernacular millennium. Ghanaśyāma’s commentaries on the plays of Kālidāsa and Rājaśekhara reveal him to be an overbearing pedant, constantly correcting classical authors for failing to follow the rules of Prakrit grammar as he understood them from Vararuci.⁴⁴ It is a great shame that his commentary on *Seven Centuries* seems to be lost. His *saṭṭaka* gives him the opportunity to put his knowledge of Prakrit to use, and he does so with remarkable aplomb: one of the recurring characters is the poet Pārijāta, a stand-in for Ghanaśyāma himself, who enacts Prakrit plays (*garbhanāṭakas*, plays within the play) and composes sophisticated Prakrit poetry on the spot. He enhances the *deśya* lexicon inherited from Rājaśekhara by “Prakritizing” Marathi words.⁴⁵ And the play is full of witty ripostes, ribald jokes, and puns. When the *vidūṣaka* asks whether so learned a poet as Ghanaśyāma is ashamed to stage a play in Prakrit—the same question put to

the director in Rājaśekhara's *Karpūramañjarī* (chapter 5)—the director responds as follows:

A heretic can't stand a sacrifice,
 an adulterer can't stand good conduct,
 and an idiot can't stand knowledge.
 A person stubbornly finds fault with whatever is hard for him.
 All those who are known for just one language
 are halfway poets:
 the one who is a poet in all languages
 shines in the world as a full-on poet.⁴⁶

Composing in Prakrit is how Ghanaśyāma can demonstrate his philological expertise and, closely bound up with it, his poetic skill. It is not as if the vernacular millennium passed these authors by: Nayacandra includes Marathi in his *Rambhāmañjarī*, Rāma pāñivāda wrote extensively in Malayalam, and Ghanaśyāma refers constantly to Marathi and Tamil idioms. Rather, they saw Prakrit as a vital component of the cosmopolitan literary tradition. They seem to be reacting to the process whereby cosmopolitan was collapsed into Sanskrit and Sanskrit alone. They resisted this process by attempting to resuscitate Prakrit. Whether or not they were successful, this “resuscitated” Prakrit was quite different from Prakrit in the first millennium. First of all, it was all the more deeply embedded in, and dependent upon, the traditional forms of Sanskrit literary culture: there simply was no Prakrit outside of a handful of theatrical genres (the *nāṭaka*, *nāṭikā*, and *saṭṭaka*) and the occasional epic (*mahākāvya*). Indeed, apart from the Kerala-based authors Līlāśuka and Rāma Pāñivāda, Prakrit was exclusively a language of stage plays, and was hence even more strongly associated with the speech of women, children, and fools. Second, the use of Prakrit was entirely dependent upon grammars and model texts, and hence composing in Prakrit was a classicizing and even perhaps even archaizing exercise. The editors of these latter-day Prakrit plays have often remarked that they appear to have been composed in Sanskrit and “translated” into Prakrit, in the manner of an exercise-book.⁴⁷ Thus, as Ghanaśyāma's comment indicates, however much Prakrit is denigrated within the world of the play, within the world of the poet it indicates a commitment to a cosmopolitan ideal of literature.

We can understand the production of Prakrit grammar and of the competitively learned *saṭṭaka* as complementary tendencies in the later history of Prakrit. These are “centripetal” tendencies, as they respond to the dispersion and marginalization of Prakrit in the vernacular millennium by linking it ever more closely with a more central cultural phenomenon: namely, Sanskrit grammar and Sanskrit literature. They are also “centripetal” in that they produce a more condensed version of Prakrit, one with a very specific grammatical shape and with a very specific

discursive role. We can see a related tendency in the production of commentaries on classical Prakrit texts.

Here we will consider just one example: the commentaries on *Rāvaṇa's Demise* by Pravarasena.⁴⁸ The tradition of commenting on this work goes back to the late tenth or early eleventh centuries, not too long after the first complete commentaries on any literary texts were composed (Prakāśavarṣa's commentary on Bhāravi's *Arjuna and the Hunter*, late ninth or early tenth centuries). The most striking feature of this commentarial tradition, however, is the number of kings who participated in it. The tradition begins with none other than Bhojadeva's father, the Paramāra king Sindhurāja (r. 995–1010 CE), otherwise known as Sāhasāṅka, whose work is now lost. Another early commentator (late eleventh century) is Harṣapāla, the king of Kāmarūpa. The best-known commentary is that of Rāmadāsa, a prince of the Kacchavāha family. Rāmadāsa wrote this commentary at the request of Jalāluddīn Akbar in 1595 CE.⁴⁹ The attraction that this text in particular held for kings and emperors is beyond the scope of this discussion, but as noted in chapter 3, it is not just courtly but imperial: it imagines the territorial expansion of political power through Rāma's conquest of Laṅkā.

The production of commentaries on *Rāvaṇa's Demise* was often a joint effort. Harṣapāla refers to the “experts in Prakrit” who helped him prepare his commentary.⁵⁰ But the anonymous commentary known as *Moonlight of the Truth of the Bridge* (*Setutattvacandrikā*) deserves special notice. This commentary refers to the interpretations of at least five other commentators by name: Sāhasāṅka and Harṣapāla, the otherwise-unknown Śrīnivāsa and Lokanātha, and above all Kulanātha. Merely collecting all of these manuscripts must have required a sustained effort in the late sixteenth century. *Moonlight* seems to represent an attempt, on the part of a group of scholars in Bengal, to produce a conspectus edition of the text—unlike most other commentaries on *Rāvaṇa's Demise*, it includes the text and a Sanskrit translation—and a commentary that reflects all of the interpretations that were then available. This is not so different a project from Nilakaṇṭha Caturdharā's hunt for manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata* for his own commentary in the late seventeenth century.⁵¹ The stakes of the project, however, were different: without a commentary that rendered it intelligible to a Sanskrit reading public, *Rāvaṇa's Demise* would never have been read at all in the vernacular millennium, and it might have suffered the same fate as *Hari's Victory* by Sarvasena, another Vākāṭaka court epic that is now lost.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SNAKES

I began this book with Mīrzā Khān's statement that Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the vernacular (*bhāṣā*) were the three main languages used for literary purposes in India. Although we can now recognize that this statement belongs to a discourse on

language and a realm of practice that is more than a millennium in the making, his description of Prakrit as “the language of the snakes” nevertheless seems to diverge sharply from earlier traditions. For neither the classical works of Prakrit literature nor the literary theorists who read these works closely contain such a characterization. Prakrit was represented as erotic, suggestive, sweet, and popularly accessible. But serpentine?

This transformation is one of the ways in which the story of Prakrit is brought to a kind of conclusion. For understanding Prakrit as “the language of the snakes,” as we will see, identifies the language with a textual tradition quite different from the one we have been examining so far. And in reidentifying Prakrit, it replaces the older language order constituted by the opposition between Sanskrit and Prakrit with an early modern order in which Sanskrit and especially Prakrit are subordinated to vernacular language practices.

This story of Prakrit’s redetermination begins in the middle of another story, which is still quite contested: the beginnings of vernacular literature in North India. Around the year 1315, a text took shape that posterity has known as *Prakrit Piṅgala*. It is ostensibly a metrical handbook, and the title implies that it was meant to do for Prakrit what Piṅgala, the author of the *Chandaḥ Sūtra*, had done for Sanskrit: namely, define all of the metrical forms that were in common use. Almost all of these definitions, however, are drawn from a long-standing tradition of metrical analysis in Prakrit and Apabhramsha, the key representatives of which (Virahāṅka, Svayambhū, and Hemacandra) were discussed in chapter 6. The examples in *Prakrit Piṅgala*, too, seem to be largely drawn from existing literature, and particularly from martial poetry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. We encounter, for example, verses in praise of Hammīra, whose last stand against ‘Alā‘uddīn Khiljī at Raṇasthambhapura in 1301 was related in Sanskrit and Persian narratives.⁵² This contemporary poetry, however, is mostly not in Prakrit. Nor is it in the kind of Apabhramsha that Hemacandra influentially described in his grammar. Scholars generally call it Avahaṭṭha, a regionalized variety of Apabhramśa, taking their cue from authors such as Vidyāpati whose vernacularization of Apabhramsha was touched on above.⁵³

Who wrote *Prakrit Piṅgala*? Piṅgala presides over the text, insofar as he was the “founder” of the discourse that the text transcreates. The discourse of metrics is what makes the sea of textuality navigable—this metaphor is at least as old as Daṇḍin—and hence the very first verse of the text praises Piṅgala as “the first boat of *bhāṣā*.”⁵⁴ But with this verse the text secures *for itself* the status of the “first poem” in this emergent literary tradition, and the status of “first poet” for Piṅgala, who is imagined to be at the helm of the ship. Piṅgala is also “marked” as the author by a *chāp*, or poetic signature, in many of its verses.⁵⁵ This, indeed, is how Lakṣmīnātha (1601) and Keśavadāsa (1602) have read this text: not just

as a transposition of the discourse of metrics into a new tradition of poetry, but a first attempt to encompass, define, and exemplify this tradition through its metrical forms. Wherever we locate the beginnings of vernacular literature in North India, and whatever we mean by this phrase, *Prakrit Piṅgala* is at least an important and understudied part of this story.⁵⁶ *Prakrit Piṅgala* gets its moorings from Prakrit literature and the Prakrit discourse on metrics, and it cites a couple verses from classics such as *Seven Centuries* and *Rāvaṇa's Demise*. But at the end of the day, it represents a literary practice distinct from Prakrit, to which it has given its name: *piṅgala*, one of the two main literary vernaculars of the Rajput kingdoms.

A long-standing tradition considered Piṅgala, the author of the *Chandaḥ Sūtra*, to be a *nāga*. Lakṣmīnātha is more specific: the Brahman Piṅgala was the incarnation of the serpent-king Śeṣa.⁵⁷ For those authors who knew Prakrit principally from *Prakrit Piṅgala*, Prakrit was indeed the language of the snakes—or more precisely, of *the snake*, Piṅgala. This explanation, which to my knowledge was first proposed by Namvar Singh, also accounts for the fact that this particular representation of Prakrit is limited to authors who came within *Prakrit Piṅgala's* sphere of influence, or equivalently, authors who wrote in or about Braj Bhāṣā: Keśavadāsa, Bhikhārīdāsa, and Mīrzā Khān. I have not traced the representation of Prakrit as the “language of the snakes” in any author before the seventeenth century or outside of what came to be known as the “Braj Maṇḍal” of North India.⁵⁸

The identification of Prakrit as the “language of the snakes” depended upon the confluence of a number of processes that I have traced in this chapter. One is the role that learned discourses, and in this case the discourse of metrics, played in preserving Prakrit as an object of knowledge. Another is the displacement of Prakrit by vernacular languages in the space of literary possibilities, and the attendant rise of vernacular textuality and decline of Prakrit textuality. Taken together, however, these processes attached the name “Prakrit” to the vernacular language practices that were collected and theorized in *Prakrit Piṅgala*, but these practices were in fact quite different from the older language practices that Prakrit had originally designated. The language of the snakes was Prakrit, but a notional, mythological Prakrit.

The representations of the vernacular millennium have had an enormous influence on how people inside and outside of India view India's literary past even today. The duality of the language of the gods and the language of men leaves no place for Prakrit except in the subterranean world of the serpents, and all of its modern parallels—the duality of learned and popular, or even cosmopolitan and vernacular—similarly fail to accommodate this language comfortably. Yet these representations are themselves the result of a process of transculturation

that fundamentally rearranged the language order in which Prakrit was embedded. The qualities that were Prakrit's strengths throughout the first millennium of its existence—its alterity to Sanskrit, its transregional circulation, its existence within the sphere of literary discourse alone—became its liabilities. What was once a “both-and” language become a “neither-nor” language.