

Inventing Prakrit

The Languages of Power

*Opera naturale è ch' uom favella,
ma così o così, natura lascia
poi fare a voi, secondo che v'abbella.*

—DANTE, *PARADISO* 26.130–132¹

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 2 and 3 tell the story of how Prakrit began. I locate its beginning in the same set of transformations that made Sanskrit the preeminent language of culture and power in South Asia. In this story, Sanskrit and Prakrit are cognate cultural practices. Chapter 2 provides a historical and conceptual framework for those transformations, and chapter 3 places the emergence of Prakrit as a literary language within this framework.

Between 50 BCE and 250 CE, the language order of India changed dramatically. This period saw the emergence of a new kind of culture-power, as Sheldon Pollock has convincingly shown, as well as the emergence of a set of language practices that indexed and constituted it.² Certain languages were thus reinvented as “languages of power.” Classical Sanskrit is the paradigmatic example: Sanskrit was already very old around 50 BCE, but its use as a language of literary and political self-expression, and the qualities of refinement and ornamentation that accompanied these uses, were very new. I argue that Prakrit was also an “old-new” language—a set of existing language practices that were reinvented by being deployed in new discursive contexts. The stable configuration of these two reinvented languages, Sanskrit and Prakrit, was the answer to a question that lies just beneath the surface of literary and political discourse around the turn of the millennium: if there is to be a “language of power,” what should it be? Rather than focusing on a single moment of invention or reinvention, the story here focuses on the centuries-long process by which “languages of power” were continuously fashioned, defined, and contested.

A “language of power” can be a language used by political power as well as language that confers power on those that use it. This reflexivity is what Dante had in mind when he noted that what makes a language “illustrious” (*illustre*) is the fact that it both illuminates and is illuminated (*illuminans et illuminatum*).³ This chapter is primarily based on the evidence of royal inscriptions, which exemplify this reflexivity. “Royal inscriptions” in this context are documents inscribed in stone—the only medium that survives from the period that concerns us here—issued on the authority of members of a royal family. In them, political power presents a particular kind of language in which it is itself presented.

Together with “private” inscriptions that refer to ruling kings, royal inscriptions are convenient for building up a historical framework. But we need to be cautious about what it is, precisely, they offer evidence for. Inscriptions have a distributed agency that makes it difficult to ask about the intentions of individuals: behind every instance of inscription stands a complex of actors (donors, officials, scribes, and so on), and, even more important, a cascade of previous instances, all of them linguistic acts that, in varying degrees, reaffirm and recalibrate the conventions of language. This makes them poor evidence for language practices at the level of individuals, but ideal evidence for language practices at the level of discourse. And it is this discursive level, and the longer-term transformation of language within it, that interests me here, rather than the question of what language particular persons or families “spoke.” We must again be cautious about how language practices at this level should be characterized. In this crucial period of transition, the inscriptions themselves tell us precious little about the languages they are composed in—what they’re called, how they’re thought of in relation to others, and so on. By comparison, literary sources tell us quite a lot, but they are largely from a later period, and thus they represent a retrospective from a world in which the dichotomy of Sanskrit and Prakrit is taken for granted. But in the early centuries of the common era, I argue, this dichotomy was still very much being worked out, and we would do well to resist the temptation to characterize the inscriptional languages of this period in these terms.

My starting point is the fact, perhaps well known but very rarely remarked upon, that the Śātavāhana dynasty, which ruled most of central India between 50 BCE and 250 CE, is closely associated both with radical innovations in inscriptional discourse in this period and with the invention of Prakrit literature. This chapter will therefore largely stay within the geographic and temporal limits of the Śātavāhana empire, although some of the developments I discuss here have important parallels in the realm of the Kuṣāṇas to the north.⁴ This story has three parts, which unfold roughly in sequence: first, the emergence of the very idea of a “language of power”; second, the competition among particular languages to achieve and monopolize this status; third, the consolidation of a stable language order in which each individual language is assigned a place.

One advantage of this account relates to what it is an account of: not the emergence of particular kinds of language use—for example, the use of Sanskrit in political inscriptions—but the emergence of a large-scale language order in which these uses find a place. Broadening the focus in this way allows us to see language practices that we would not otherwise see. Foremost among these previously invisible practices is Prakrit, which has almost always been treated as a fixed point of departure for the process of Sanskritization rather than as a practice in its own right, or as I argue here, a counterpractice to Sanskrit. The theory of Sanskritization itself will therefore have to be revised in light of these findings, and I offer some suggestions for revising it in the chapter's conclusion. Another advantage is that the genealogy offered here accounts for some of the unique features of the classical language order. Why, for example, is Prakrit used at all in the classical literature of India? The answer must refer, in part, to the background of language practices against which this literature took shape. Finally, where most accounts focus on a single moment of emergence, this account foregrounds the trajectories, some extending over centuries, in which language practices are defined, refined, and ordered, as well as the networks of discourse in which these individual moments are situated.

While much of the evidence marshaled here has long been known to scholarship, it has proven notoriously difficult to situate in a convincing historical narrative.⁵ Recent research, however, has provided a relatively stable consensus regarding the chronology of the Śātavāhanas, at least starting from the reign of Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi in the last quarter of the first century CE.⁶ Thanks to this chronology, we can for the first time construct a convincing picture of language and power in the generations before Rudradāman, whose Junāgarh inscription of 150 CE previously provided us with the first fixed date in the history of Sanskrit as a language of power. The chronology of the early Śātavāhana rulers remains very provisional, but it will do no damage to the argument if the developments that I provisionally assign to the early first century BCE in fact occurred several generations earlier or later. A tabular chronology can be found in appendix A and a bibliography of the inscriptions referred to in this chapter, as well as other historically significant inscriptions, can be found in appendix B.⁷

INVENTING A DISCOURSE

Nāneghāt, or “Coin Pass,” is a narrow pass through the Western Ghats, a few hours north of Pune in today's Maharashtra, that connects the coastal lowlands with the Deccan plateau. Here, around the beginning of the first century BCE, the Śātavāhanas—a family that had recently established control over large parts of what is now Maharashtra, northern Karnataka, and western Telangana—created an unprecedented monument to their own power. A number of caves were



FIGURE 1. The Nāṇeghāt Cave in 2014 (photo by the author).

excavated from the face of the cliff. The largest of these contained portraits of the royal family, carved in deep relief into the back wall, and an inscription listing the sacrifices the family had performed, carved into the two side walls.⁸ The monument provided a political reading of the physical geography of the region: whether entering or exiting the Deccan plateau, travelers would know who its overlords were.

The word “Deccan” derives from *dakṣiṇāpatha*, the “Southern Path,” a network of overland trade routes dating back at least to the middle of the first millennium BCE. Starting around the first century BCE, the Sātavāhanas identified the Southern Path as the space of their political ambitions, and it underwent rapid economic integration and urbanization under their control.⁹ Nāṇeghāt was a monumental argument for the Sātavāhanas being, as they claimed in the accompanying inscription and as they would define themselves for centuries afterwards, “Lords of the Southern Path” (*dakṣiṇāpathapati*).¹⁰

The visual language of this argument was the rock-cut cave. This architectural form, introduced under the Mauryas two centuries earlier, became ever more closely associated with the Deccan under the patronage of the Sātavāhanas and other local dynasts.¹¹ The largest concentration of rock-cut caves in India, used

by Buddhists during the first centuries BCE and CE, is in Junnar, quite close to Nāṇeghāt. Whereas every other rock-cut cave in the Deccan served a religious function, either as a living cell (*vihāra*) or meditation hall (*caitya*) for renunciant monks, the purpose of the cave at Nāṇeghāt seems to have been overtly and primarily political. The sculptural representation of contemporary rulers is without earlier known precedents in India,¹² and Nāṇeghāt's discursive representation of these rulers in a new kind of language—a poetry of politics, in stark and obvious contrast to the prosaic inscriptions of earlier kings—was likewise unprecedented. Soon, however, the Sātavāhanas, their allies, and their rivals were all advancing their respective claims to power in this new idiom.¹³

The portraits are now completely effaced, and the inscription is badly damaged. The visual focus of the back wall, and the subject of the inscription, appears to have been King Śrī Sātakarni and Queen Nāganikā. Although major questions remain about its interpretation, the inscription gives us an idea of what kind of power this couple aspired to exercise, and why this kind of power required a new kind of language to represent it.

The inscription can be divided into three parts. The first (lines 1–2 on the left wall) bore invocations and a date that is now lost; the second (lines 2–6 on the left wall), a eulogy (*praśasti*) of the Sātavāhana royal family, and the third (the remainder of the left wall and the entirety of the right wall), a list of Vedic sacrifices that the Sātavāhana royal family performed and their donations, on the occasion of those sacrifices, to the officiating priests and spectators.¹⁴ The invocations are addressed both to Vedic deities such as Indra and post-Vedic deities such as Saṃkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva (Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa), indicating a broad commitment to what would later be identified as *śrauta* and *smārta* varieties of Hinduism. In my reading, they also announce the major themes of the inscription, similar in function to the introductory verses of later texts.

With its introductory invocation to *dharma*, the inscription almost seems to refer to the controversy surrounding this important concept. For the renunciant monks with whom the rock-cut caves were primarily associated, it meant the teachings of people like the Buddha. Within the quickly ramifying Vedic tradition, *dharma* ranged in meaning from “the divine principle that gave legitimacy and meaning to a worldly ruler,” to the god Varuṇa, the “lord of *dharma*,” to the sacrifices enjoined by the Vedas themselves.¹⁵ The other theme is *dakṣiṇā*, hinted at by the invocation to the four “world-protectors” (*lokapālas*) beginning with Yama, the guardian of the southern direction. For *dakṣiṇā* refers both to the geographic south, and to the gifts made over to the Brahman priests who officiate at Vedic sacrifices. The word *dakṣiṇāpatha*, besides its conventional designation of the Deccan as a geopolitical space, was used in Vedic literature for the “southern path” in the place where the rituals were performed, along which the cows given to the sacrificing priests as *dakṣiṇā* were led during certain rites.¹⁶ This phrase thus fuses

the cosmic space of the ritual and the geographic space within which people and goods circulated.

Dharma and *dakṣiṇā* are the key terms in the vision of political power on display at Nāneghāt. The Sātavāhanas sought to be kings rather than de facto rulers, and their performance of the Vedic rituals of consecration and sovereignty—such as the *rājasūya* and *aśvamedha*—entailed a performance of their powers of redistribution. The coins issued by Śrī Sātakarṇi and Nāganikā on the occasion of one of their horse sacrifices (see figure 2), which are likely the same coins referred to in the inscription, similarly reflect the fusion of two kinds of authority, one enacted through ritual and another disseminated through the instruments of exchange.

One obvious but nevertheless crucial aspect of this kind of power is its construction through literary language. While previous rulers, most notably Aśoka, represented their power in inscriptional discourse, the Sātavāhanas were the first to do so in an unmistakably literary style.¹⁷ The second section of the inscription consists of about three hundred syllables—most of them no longer legible—making up a single sentence. Its syntactic core, “sacrifices were offered” ([*ya*] *ñehi yīṭham*), is an abrupt conclusion to a breathless series of long compounds that describe the royal family. These words abound in figures of sound, and specifically the alliterative pairs that later authors would call *chekānuprāsa*: for example, *sagara-giri-vara-valāya pathaviya pathamavīrasa*, “the foremost hero upon the ocean- and mountain-girdled earth,” or the title *dakhināpathapati* itself.¹⁸ The final phrase, which probably refers to Śrī Sātakarṇi’s queen, Nāganikā, consists of at least five carefully chosen compounds, each longer than the previous one: *māsopavāsiniya gahatāpasāya caritabrahmacariyāya dikhavratayamñasumḍāya yañāhutidhūpanasugamdhāya*, “fasting for months, practicing the austerities of the household, practicing chastity [appropriate to a widow], skilled in initiation, vows, and rituals, and fragrant with the incense she has offered in sacrifices.” Note also the repetition of the word *yaṁṇa* in different senses within adjacent words, which would later be called *lāṭānuprāsa*.¹⁹

The style of this inscription is instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with the later tradition of literary prose. For the “essence of literary prose” was widely agreed to be a quality called “power” (*ojas*) that was defined by precisely the features we encounter in the Nāneghāt inscription: long compounds, a density of words, the repetition of words in various senses, and elaboration on a single subject, according to the earliest available discussion of the subject in the *Treatise on Theater* (early centuries CE).²⁰ In all of the literature prior to this inscription that we know of—whether in Sanskrit, Pali, or Ardhamāgadhi—there was nothing quite like it. Indeed, the extreme density of compound words that characterizes the powerful style is found in none of the Indo-European languages that they are related to, and possibly no other language in the world. Conversely, the stylistic continuities between this inscription and later literary prose in Sanskrit and Prakrit cannot



FIGURE 2. *Aśvamedha* coin of Śrī Sātakarṇi and Nāganika (courtesy of Shailendra Bhandare).

possibly be accidental. The origins of “power” as a quality of language can thus be traced to these early attempts to represent political power in language. It may have been imagined as a counterpart to the quality of “sweetness” (*mādhurya*), which had already been theorized in Aśoka’s time, and which was the dominant quality of lyric poetry, above all the Prakrit lyric poetry that the Sātavāhanas themselves patronized.²¹ We might say, speculatively, that the discourse of the Sātavāhanas was already being organized around the complementary principles of “power” and “sweetness” in the respective domains of political and literary expression.

Vocabulary formed another component of this new language of power. The basic concepts, such as unlimited sovereignty, were inherited from the Vedic models that the inscription itself invokes so vividly, as well as from the Buddhist models that operate behind the scenes. In this inscription, however, they are refashioned and made more universal, imaginative, and idealized. Thus, rather than depicting themselves as “wheel-turning” emperors (*cakravartin*) of ancient lore, the Sātavāhanas called themselves “those whose wheels are unstoppable” (*apratihata-caka*), an epithet that is condensed and allusive: the “wheels” in question are those of the royal chariot, but perhaps also the “spheres” of political influence theorized in works such as the *Treatise on Power*. This term quickly became part of the standard vocabulary of kingship within the Sātavāhana sphere of influence.²² This vocabulary singles out qualities such as martial valor that are not tied to any particular tradition or imagination of kingship, and represents them through timeless epithets rather than the narration of specific events. Power is not something the ruler enacts on specific occasions; as the Nāsik inscription shows in greater detail (see below), it inheres in him always and essentially.

The final aspect of this inscription noteworthy here is the type of language it is written in. Although modern scholarship calls it Prakrit, it differs markedly from the literary Prakrit that would develop somewhat later in the Sātavāhana

empire.²³ We have absolutely no evidence for the name that contemporaries would have used for the language of this inscription, the “actors’ category.” To use unambiguously “analysts’ categories,” it is a western variety of Middle Indic, clearly continuous with the language of Aśoka’s inscriptions in western India, which had become an epigraphic *lingua franca* by the first century BCE, evidently without ever having been standardized in any systematic way. Just as important as its linguistic features are the places in and on which it appeared. The space in which this language circulated, its “linguistic volume,” corresponded roughly to the space of the Sātavāhanas’ political ambitions.²⁴ The surfaces on which it was inscribed were usually the walls of rock-cut caves (*leṇa*), or the architectural elements of a Buddhist *stūpa*. Inscription was a prerogative of donors. Thus, to be able to use this language in the first place, the Sātavāhanas had to be donors. This is one of the reasons why donation is foregrounded in representations of the Sātavāhanas, and it also accounts for why rulers so ostensibly devoted to *śrauta* rituals could also be represented, in subsequent generations, as donors to Buddhist communities. In fact, the Śrī Sātakarṇi eulogized at Nāṇeghāt may well be identical to the Sātavāhana king who is depicted, at a distance of more than three hundred miles and roughly a hundred and fifty years from Nāṇeghāt, in one of the reliefs at the Buddhist *mahācaitya* at Kanaganahalli in what is now northern Karnataka.

There, amid representations of other Sātavāhana rulers, we encounter a scene (figure 3) that a label inscription explains for us: in the same variety of Middle Indic employed at Nāṇeghāt, and substantially the same script, it reads: “King Sātakarṇi donates silver lotus flowers to the Great *Caitya*” (*rāyā sātakaṇ[i mahāce-] (t)[i]yasa r(u)pāmayāni payumāni oṇ(o)yeti*).²⁵

The later traditions of royal eulogy (*praśasti*) and literary prose (*gadyakāvya*) that the Nāṇeghāt inscription anticipates are predominantly Sanskrit traditions. Indeed, after the third century CE, it was increasingly unthinkable to compose a royal eulogy in any language other than Sanskrit. It is therefore important to emphasize that at this point, in the first century BCE, composing such a text in Sanskrit was equally unthinkable. In fact, the earliest surviving Sanskrit inscriptions of any sort are not much earlier than this one.²⁶ Herman Tieken claimed that “there is something extremely absurd in the long enumeration in Prākṛit of Vedic sacrifices and the fees paid to priests found in the Nānāghāt Cave Inscription . . . [w]ith it the Sātavāhanas seem to say: ‘See how great and powerful we are despite the fact that we do not know Sanskrit.’”²⁷ Whether or not the Sātavāhanas themselves knew Sanskrit is unknowable and for our purposes irrelevant: what matters is that, in their world, political power never spoke Sanskrit. According to one explanation of this absence, Sanskrit was still regarded as a language of Vedic ritual and its associated discourses, and its separation from the world of politics and administration—and also writing—was enforced by religious sanctions.²⁸ Sanskrit, moreover, was never composed in the “powerful” style that characterizes



FIGURE 3. Sātakarnī making a donation to Buddhist monks at Kanaganahalli (photo by the author, with the permission of the Archaeological Survey of India).

the Nāneghāt inscription. The dichotomy of Sanskrit and Prakrit as literary languages, I argue, was one of the final results of the process that the Sātavāhanas set in motion. At this stage in the process, the very concept of a “language of power” was new, and it was not grammatical features but stylistic and aesthetic qualities that constituted it.

The success of the Sātavāhanas' experiments can be gauged from the way they were imitated by their eastern rivals, the Mahāmeghavāhanas.²⁹ In a well-known inscription in the cave-complex at Udayagiri, near Bhubaneswar in today's Odisha, King Khāravela provided a year-by-year summary of his rule in a "powerful" style similar to that of the Nāṇeghāt inscription, and in a nearly identical language.³⁰ Khāravela there claims to have invaded Sātavāhana territories—specifically Ṛṣika, in today's Khandesh—"without a care for Sātakarṇi," the ruler whom the Nāṇeghāt inscription memorializes.³¹ Its "narrative compounds," which served to enrich the transregional language of power, are an outstanding feature of Khāravela's inscription, expressing an action in a compressed and rapid way appropriate to the powerful style.³² Another feature is its carefully calibrated prose rhythm, which arises from joining together words of a similar prosodic shape.³³

The concluding portion of the inscription, which is its most insistently literary, contains a number of echoes of the language used at Nāṇeghāt.³⁴ Whereas a Sātavāhana king was there described as *apratihata-cakasa*, "whose wheels are unstoppable," Khāravela is described as *apatihata-caka-vāhana-balo*, "whose wheels, mounts, and forces are unstoppable," a phrase that also echoes the family names of Mahāmeghavāhana Khāravela and his Sātavāhana rivals. And whereas someone at Nāṇeghāt was described as *aṃgiya-kula-vadhanasa*, "he who brings prosperity to the Aṅgika family," Khāravela is described as *ceta-rāja-vaṃsa-vadhanena*, "he who brings prosperity to the line of Ceta kings."

Khāravela's inscription also provides us with a better sense than we get at Nāṇeghāt, because it is better preserved, of the kind of power that this new language was increasingly associated with. Its byword is "all" (*sava-*): the king, though himself a Jain layman, "honors all religious traditions," "sponsors the reconstruction of all temples," and "gives food and drink to all residents, to all royal officers, to all householders, to all Brahmins, as well as to all of the Jain and Buddhist monks, at a cost of hundreds of thousands."³⁵ This is faint evidence, but evidence nonetheless, of an incipient cosmopolitan vision that would later need to be expressed in a cosmopolitan language.

THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE

After a few generations of relative silence, the Sātavāhana rulers got back into the epigraphic habit around the middle of the first century CE. To this later period belongs the inscription of the Queen Mother, Gautamī Balaśrī, the longest and most literary of all the extant Sātavāhana inscriptions. I date it to around 103 CE, which would make it one of the earliest documents that is universally recognized to be a *praśasti*, a poem of praise.³⁶ In terms of its language, it clearly belongs to the discourse of power that took shape several generations earlier. But as the inscription itself tells us, something had happened in the



FIGURE 4. The “Queen’s Cave” at Nāsik (photo by the author).

intervening years that fundamentally destabilized both the political order and the discursive practices of power. A completely different cultural politics underlies the inscriptions of the early first century BCE and the turn of the second century CE.

Gautamī Balaśrī financed the construction of what would be called “The Queen’s Cave” in what was already a well-established complex of rock-cut cells for Buddhist monks on a hill outside of Nāsik. She used the prerogatives of patronage to inscribe onto its walls a long eulogy of her son, Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi, although he had died almost twenty years earlier. A fragmentary inscription from the base of a sculpture near the Buddhist *mahācaitya* at Kanaganahalli presents many parallels to the Nāsik inscription, and strongly suggests that there was an “official story” about Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi that was propagated throughout the Sātavāhana empire through inscriptions.³⁷

And quite a story it was. The central portion of the queen’s inscription reads as follows:

... crusher of the pride and arrogance of the Kṣatriyas, destroyer of the Scythians, Greeks, and Parthians, levier of taxes in accordance with *dharma*, delighting not in harming living beings even when his enemies have committed misdeeds, bringer



FIGURE 5. Fragmentary stela from Sannati with inscription commemorating Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi (from Sarma and Varaprasada Rao 1993).

of prosperity to the houses of Brahmins and the low-born, the exterminator of the Kṣaharāta line, the reestablisher of the glory of the Sātavāhana family, at whose feet the whole circle of kings bows, who put an end to the mixing of the four *varṇas*, who was victorious in many battles over a confederation of enemies, whose flag of victory remained unconquered, whose capital city was impossible for enemies to assail, who inherited from his ancestors the loud sounds of royalty.³⁸

The events here alluded to have been reconstructed with reasonable certainty from other inscriptions and from numismatic evidence. Starting in the second century BCE, groups of Scythians—hereafter Śakas, as they call themselves in their inscriptions—migrated into northern India from central Asia. The leaders of these Śaka groups typically styled themselves Kṣatrapas, which had previously referred to the military governors of the Achaemenid empire. One of these groups, calling themselves Kṣaharātas, established a small kingdom in what was now Gujarat. In the middle of the first century CE, a ruler named Nahapāna wrested a number of key sites from the Sātavāhanas, probably intending to control the trade between India and Rome, which was then at its peak volume. Eventually, however, Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi retook all of these sites from Nahapāna and the local kings who had thrown in their lots with him.³⁹

The eulogy of Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi incorporates a diversity of styles, ranging from highly compact and composite to punchy and analytic.⁴⁰ It re-deploys the figures of sound we encountered at Nāṇeghāt within new figures of sense: Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi's face, for example, is "as white as a lotus made to blossom by the rays of the sun" (*divasakara-kara-vibodhita-kamala-vimala-sadisa-vadanasa*). The version at Sannati includes a passage that plays on Gautamīputra's family name, as Khāravēla did at Udayagiri: the king is "one whose forces and mounts are on the rise, one whose mounts are unstoppable, the Sātavāhana" (*samudita-bala-vāhanasa abhaga-vāhanasa sātavāhanasa*); at Nāsik he is described as "one whose mounts have drunk the water of the three oceans" (*ti-samuda-toya-pīta-vāhanasa*). The final scene of the queen's inscription at Nāsik features a final battle attended by all kinds of mythological beings, in which the hero ascends directly into heaven from the shoulders of his elephant. Almost every aspect of these inscriptions suggests deep and systematic connections with courtly poetry. Here it is sufficient to note, with A. B. Keith, that "the appearance of mannerisms of the later *Kāvya* . . . implies current familiarity with the themes."⁴¹ It is, in other words, one of the earliest examples of *kāvya* available to us. And it appears that political discourse of the Sātavāhanas had a significant, if largely indirect, influence on the imagination of power in later *kāvya*.⁴² This discourse is undoubtedly a "poetry of politics."⁴³

What distinguishes Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakarṇi's eulogy, and what has so far kept it out of the history of courtly literature, is the fact that it is in neither Sanskrit or Prakrit. Nearly all of the Sātavāhana inscriptions fit the same description. Like the earlier inscriptions at Nāṇeghāt and Udayagiri, these inscriptions are very often said to be in Prakrit, but only in the sense that everything that is not exactly Sanskrit can be regarded as Prakrit. In fact, it was noted long ago that in their inscriptions, the Sātavāhanas "touch so closely upon Sanskrit that they seem rather to guard against it than to try to write it."⁴⁴ Their language is closer to standard Sanskrit than to the language that the Sātavāhanas themselves called Prakrit—if we credit the tradition that a Sātavāhana king compiled *Seven Centuries* (see chapter 3).

We must be careful to distinguish "our" questions regarding the language of Sātavāhana inscriptions from "their" questions. I am claiming that a "question of language" was posed abruptly in the middle of the first century CE: given that there is such a thing as a "language of power"—something established by the discursive practices of earlier generations of rulers—what might that language actually be? During this time, new practices were introduced, and old practices were invested with new meanings. And as a result, the stakes of language choice were entirely different at the time of Balaśrī's inscription at Nāsik than they were at the time of Nāganikā's inscription at Nāṇeghāt.

The most significant break with existing language practices in this period was the use of Sanskrit in political inscriptions. As we will see, this innovation must

be attributed to the Kṣatrapas. And it is true that the Sātavāhanas overwhelmingly preferred to use Middle Indic in their inscriptions, while their Kṣatrapa opponents exhibited a greater willingness to use Sanskrit. We now know, however, that the Sātavāhanas did use Sanskrit in political inscriptions, if only rarely. The narratives of diametrically opposed cultural politics—of Kṣatrapas versus Sātavāhanas, foreigners versus native rulers, and Sanskrit versus Prakrit—need to be critically revised.

A pair of inscriptions sponsored by Nahapāna's son-in-law Uṣavadāta can serve as an example of the kind of experimentation that the Kṣatrapas engaged in, enabling us to better understand how and why Sanskrit came to figure in these experiments. One inscription, found on the wall of a Buddhist cave at Nāsik, exhibits the functional differentiation of language that would characterize many later inscriptions, where Sanskrit was used for "expressive" purposes and other languages for "documentary" purposes. The first part is a eulogy of Uṣavadāta in fairly correct Sanskrit, and the second part records in Middle Indic his donation of the cave and the accompanying cistern.⁴⁵ An inscription at Kārle, more than a hundred miles away, contains a parallel version of the eulogy of Uṣavadāta, but in Middle Indic rather than in Sanskrit.⁴⁶ The two texts are presented in table 1.

These inscriptions represent two sets of choices, and two sets of cultural-historical possibilities, regarding language use. The "Kārle path" involved the use of Middle Indic for any and all purposes that required permanent inscription; it was a direct continuation of the language practices of an earlier era. The "Nāsik path" involved a differentiation of language. Sanskrit was used to reinscribe portions of discourse that had already been inscribed in Middle Indic at Kārle, thus forming an association between Sanskrit and the permanence of iterability, and between Sanskrit and the kind of discourse that merited this permanence: the expressive self-representation of political power. The creation of distinct discursive functions for Sanskrit implied the relegation of Middle Indic to other functions: the specific, the documentary, the occasional. By calling these different sets of choices "paths," I mean to connect them to their longer-term effects. The "Nāsik path" leads somewhere: to the expansion of Sanskrit in political discourse at the expense of Middle Indic, to the devaluation and destabilization of Middle Indic, and to the redetermination of Sanskrit as not just *a* language of power but *the* language of power.

This reconfiguration occurred along aesthetic, and emphatically not religious, lines. Indeed Uṣavadāta's inscriptions represent an economy of religious donation that cuts across sectarian boundaries: according to the Nāsik inscription, Uṣavadāta purchased a field from a Brahman family, then donated it to the local Buddhist community along with a rock-cut cave, on the walls of which he recorded his prior donations to Brahmins. Some scholars have connected Uṣavadāta's self-professed religious motivations with his use of Sanskrit. "[T]he pressure to use Sanskrit," Johannes Bronkhorst writes, "went hand in hand with the pressure

TABLE 1 Comparison of the introductory portion of Uṣavadāta's inscriptions

Kārle [99]	Nāsik [100]	Translation
<i>raño khaharātasa khata- pasa nahapānasa jā[ma] tarā [dini]kapūtena usabhadātena tigosatasahasade[na]</i>	<i>rājñah kṣaharātasya kṣatrapasya nahapānasya jāmātrā dīnikaputrena uṣavadātena trigośatasahasradena</i>	By Uṣavadāta, the son-in-law of King Kṣaharāta Kṣatrapa Nahapāna, the son of Dīnika, the giver of three hundred thousand cows, who established a holy site on the river Bārñāsā through a donation of gold,
<i>nadiyā bañāsāyā s[u]- vañatathakareṇa</i>	<i>nadyā bārñāsāyām suvarṇadānatīrthakareṇa</i>	who gave sixteen villages to the deities and Brāhmaṇas, who gave eight wives to the Brāhmaṇas at the holy site in Prabhāsa,
<i>... brahmaṇāna ca soḷa[sa] gāma[d]e[na] prabhāse pūtatithe brahmaṇāna aṭhabhāyāp[r]a- [dena] anuvāsaṃ pi tu satasahasam bhojapayita</i>	<i>devatabhyaḥ brāhmaṇebhyaś ca ṣoḍaśagrāmadena prabhāse punyatīrthe brāhmaṇebhyaḥ aṣṭabhāryāpradena anuvārṣam brāhmaṇasatasāhasrībhojāpayitrā bharukacche daśapure govardhane śorpare ca catuśālāvasadhaprati śrayapradena ārāmataḍḍagaūdapānakareṇa ibāpārādādamañatāpīkarabeṇādā hanukānāvāpunyatarakareṇa etāsām ca naḍinām ubhato tīraṃ sabhāprapākareṇa piṇḍītakāvaḍe govardhane suvarṇamukhe śorpare ca rāmātīrthe carakaparṣabhyaḥ grāme nānaṃgole dvātrīśatanāḷige ramūlasahasrapradena govardhane trīraśmiṣu parvateṣu dharmātmanā . . .</i>	who feeds hundreds of thou- sands of Brāhmaṇas every year, who gave four-roomed rest houses in Bharukaccha, Dāsapura, Govardhana, and Śūrpāraka, who has made gardens, tanks, and wells, who has established free crossings at the Ibā, Pārādā, Damaṇa, Tāpī, Karabeṇā, Dāhanukā, and Nāvā rivers, and who has established public watering stations on both banks of these rivers, who gave thirty-two thousand coconut-tree stems at the village Nānaṃgola to the associations of <i>carakas</i> at Piṇḍītakāvaḍa, Govardhana, Suvarṇamukha, and Śūrpāraka, who was very pious in the Trīraśmi hills at Govar- dhana . . .

to accept the Brahmanical vision of society.”⁴⁷ The problem with this argument is that a Brahmanical vision of society had never needed to be expressed in Sanskrit before; indeed, according to a strict “Brahmanical vision,” the pressure should have gone the other way: Sanskrit, the language of solemn Vedic rituals, should

never have been used for the political self-promotion of *arriviste* warlords like Uṣavadāta.⁴⁸ What did need to be expressed in Sanskrit, however, was verse. The use of Sanskrit for expressive purposes finds parallels in two other inscriptions, which together testify to the large geographic area in which these changes were taking place. An inscription from the reign of Śoḍāsa in Mathurā (early first century CE) has a date in Middle Indic and a verse in Sanskrit in the *bhujāṅgavijṛmbhita* meter. And a fragmentary inscription that was found close to the fragmentary eulogy of Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakaṛṇi mentioned above speaks of a deceased king—probably Gautamīputra himself—in Sanskrit verses in the *vasantatilaka* meter. This inscription probably dates to the period between 85 and 100 CE.⁴⁹

The Sātavāhanas put an end to the Kṣaharātas, but did not thereby put an end to the language question of the first century CE. In their inscriptions—most explicitly in the eulogy of Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakaṛṇi—they represented their victory as a return of social and political order. But some of these inscriptions were done only a few steps from those of Uṣavadāta. According to the cultural logic that governed inscription, what was inscribed should not and could not be uninscribed: a verse in the contemporary *Seven Centuries* makes it clear that “letters carved on stone” were supposed to last forever.⁵⁰ The official documents of the “reconquista” reaffirm the traditional language practices of the Sātavāhanas; more precisely, they “traditionalized” practices that previously had no such cultural valence. The use of Middle Indic, which earlier generations had taken for granted, now contrasted with the incipient use of Sanskrit. Thus when the Sātavāhanas boasted of restoring social and political order, and did so in Middle Indic, they were proclaiming the restoration of a cultural order as well. They had been forced to take a stand on the language question.

The Sātavāhanas were well attuned to the possibilities of language as an instrument of culture-power, and for these purposes they gave their strongest support to languages other than Sanskrit: the inscriptional Middle Indic of their ancestors, employed for political literary prose, and the language of literature in the Deccan plains, used for courtly lyrics. This does not mean that they were in principle opposed to the use of Sanskrit for such purposes, or that they “attempted to preserve Sanskrit in its ancient and pristine sacral isolation.”⁵¹ In fact, there is some evidence that the Sātavāhanas experimented with political Sanskrit both during and immediately after their conflict with Nahapāna: while most of their inscriptions, as well as coin legends, are in Middle Indic, the aforementioned verse inscription found at Sannati, which probably refers to Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakaṛṇi, is in Sanskrit, and at least one coin of Gautamīputra Śrī Sātakaṛṇi with a Sanskrit legend has come to light.⁵²

These experiments seem to have been short-lived, given that the Sātavāhanas would go on to rule for at least another century after Sātakaṛṇi’s death, and they apparently used Middle Indic exclusively in their official documents throughout

this period. But the experiments nevertheless allow us to see something important about the Sātavāhanas' cultural politics: they seem to have been less concerned about the strict confinement of Sanskrit to the ritual sphere than about the creation of a new sphere of culture-power in which Sanskrit did not already have a monopoly. It is ironic, albeit predictable in hindsight, that Sanskrit, once introduced into this sphere, would fill it to the exclusion of the languages that the Sātavāhanas themselves promoted.

Even after their victory over the Kṣaharātas, the Sātavāhanas had to adjust to a larger political reality in which their cultural practices, to whatever extent they were normative within their own empire, were not quite so normative outside of it. Most important, the Sātavāhanas found themselves in an uneasy alliance with the Kārdamaka rulers of Ujjayinī. Like the Kṣaharātas, these rulers were Śakas and called themselves Kṣatrapas, and like the Kṣaharātas they were receptive to the political power of Sanskrit. In 150 CE, the Kārdamaka ruler Rudradāman produced what has been seen as one of the founding documents of the Sanskrit cosmopolis: a long eulogistic inscription in Sanskrit literary prose carved onto the face of a rock at Junāgaṛh, in the Kathiawad peninsula of Gujarat.⁵³ The history surveyed so far, however, puts us in a position to see this inscription somewhat differently, not as the sudden emergence of a new kind of discourse, but as one step—albeit more of a leap—in the dialectical development of a language of power. To trace this development, we need to start from about a hundred years earlier.

Why were rulers like Uṣavadāta receptive to the political uses of Sanskrit in the first place?⁵⁴ The texts that survive do not give us access to their intentions. One suggestion has been that these foreigners faced a severe “legitimation crisis.” Their rule, as the *Yugapurāṇa* conveys in no uncertain terms, was thought to signal the end of the world. Hence they turned to Sanskrit in order to publicly demonstrate their acceptance of the sociocultural authority of the Brahmins.⁵⁵ There are, however, good reasons to be skeptical of this theory, both the general model of legitimation through the instrumental use of cultural signifiers, and the specific claim that Sanskrit was such a signifier. As noted above, orthodox Brahmins, the putative audience of this political theater, might even have regarded political self-glorification as an illegitimate use of their sacred language. Another theory emphasizes the very illegitimacy, according to the traditional understanding, of these new practices: foreigners were able to use Sanskrit in new ways precisely because they did not feel themselves to be bound by the sociocultural norms that kept Sanskrit strictly within the sphere of Vedic ritual. “In wresting from the schools and liturgy of the Brahmins their mysterious language,” Sylvain Lévi observes, these foreigners “raised up against the confused variety of local Prākritis an adversary which alone was capable of triumphing over it.”⁵⁶

My explanation relies on a distinction between discourse in Sanskrit, which necessarily involves a will to compose in Sanskrit, and discourse in “hybrid”

languages—a term that has become standard despite problems with the metaphor of hybridity—which does not self-evidently involve such a will, however similar to Sanskrit such languages might appear to us. These practices are related to each other, but they are not two points on a sliding scale of “Sanskritization”: the deliberate use of Sanskrit took place against a background of “hybrid” language practices. There are political aspects to both practices, but the motivations and strategies behind them might have been much more different than is usually thought. In particular, the use of “hybrid” languages does not necessarily betoken a desire for prestige, legitimacy, or even correctness.

Politics of the first century CE were transregional in two senses. The Sātavāhana empire, from its very beginnings, incorporated smaller areas into a political supraregion that the Sātavāhanas called “the Southern Path.” The politics of the Kṣaharātas and Kārdamakas were organized as military governorships that migrated over enormous areas. In both types of politics, locally dominant language practices must have come in contact with each other at the highest levels of official discourse. And as these two types of politics confronted each other over the course of the first and second centuries CE, they borrowed, adapted, and contested each other’s strategies for navigating the complexities of language use within their realms. The Kṣaharātas, for example, had used three scripts on their coins: Kharoṣṭhī, Greek, and Brāhmī, reflecting their movement from the northwest, where the erstwhile Indo-Greek kingdoms were located, to western and southern India. Upon contact with them, the Sātavāhanas adopted the practice of issuing portrait coins, something no previous Indian dynasty had done. These coins featured bilingual legends, with Middle Indic on one side and Tamil on the other.⁵⁷

Sanskrit played an increasingly important role in the language practices of the Kṣatrapas, but probably more because of the fact that they were migratory and in need of a workable lingua franca than because of the fact that they were foreign and in need of legitimacy. All of the Kṣatrapas, including the family of Rājūvula at Mathurā as well as the Kṣaharātas and Kārdamakas, are associated with what has been called “Epigraphic Hybrid Sanskrit.”⁵⁸ This name is modelled on what Franklin Edgerton called “Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit,” which encompasses any type of Sanskrit used by Buddhists that deviates in any degree from the standard Sanskrit defined by Pāṇini. Epigraphic Hybrid Sanskrit also encompasses any inscriptional language in which there is a mixture of standard Sanskrit forms with Middle Indic forms. The received wisdom is that this language represents an attempt to write in Sanskrit on the part of people who didn’t actually know the language, and that what induced these people to make the attempt despite their ignorance was the cultural superiority of the Brahmins—and particularly the Brahmins of Mathurā, from where Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit is thought to have radiated.⁵⁹ The major flaw of this account is that it explains “hybrid” languages as a failure to write in standard Sanskrit, although in a few diagnostic cases we can be sure that people

who wrote in “hybrid” languages were quite capable of writing in standard Sanskrit: this is the case, for example, in Uṣavadāta’s Nāsik inscription, where Sanskrit and Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit appear side by side.

The “Sanskritization” of Middle Indic finds a better explanation in the fact that Sanskrit forms—which need not necessarily have been recognized as belonging to the Sanskrit language at all—were often the common denominator among the locally dominant languages that the Kṣatrapas encountered on their distant campaigns. Forms such as *kṣatrapasa*, which look “sanskritized” in comparison to forms such as *khataṭpasa*, may reflect the influence of relatively conservative languages such as Gāndhārī. In this case, as in many others, the case ending may remain “unsanskritized” simply because all of the locally dominant languages agree.⁶⁰ On this account, Sanskritization did not begin as Sanskritization at all, but as a regression to the linguistic mean. A bottom-up explanation like this for a broadly based cultural phenomenon such as Sanskritization should be preferred on principle to top-down explanations that invoke the strategic use of cultural signifiers by a foreign elite. But they are not mutually incompatible: once the language of inscriptional discourse could be recognized as Sanskrit, which would perhaps involve its passing a certain threshold of “hybridity,” one could choose to compose in Sanskrit.

Where we do actually encounter Sanskrit in the inscriptions of the first and second centuries—apart from verse, which is only ever inscribed in Sanskrit—it is a translation of an existing discourse. This can clearly be observed in Uṣavadāta’s inscriptions, one of which is a translation into Sanskrit of the other. Both inscriptions, however, can be thought of more broadly as translations of a discourse of power that the Sātavāhanas had developed in previous generations. This is equally true of the mature political Sanskrit of Rudradāman, which is more indebted to Sātavāhana models of political discourse than it appears. All of the inscriptions prior to 150 CE that are dated to the reigns of Rudradāman, or his grandfather Caṣṭana, are simple memorials composed in Epigraphic Hybrid Sanskrit. At some point in the 140s, he gave his daughter in marriage to Vāsiṣṭhiputra Śrī Sātakarṇi, and she left a unique Sanskrit inscription in the Kānherī caves just north of today’s Mumbai. It seems, however, that the marriage alliance did not prevent hostilities, and in his Junāgaṛh inscription Rudradāman claims to have “acquired fame by sparing Sātakarṇi, the lord of the Southern Path, because their relation was not remote, although he defeated him twice in a fair fight.”⁶¹ It is only after he entered into a marital alliance with the Sātavāhanas, and encountered their practice of a “poetry of polity,” that he could have wanted, and been able, to produce the kind of inscription that he did at Junāgaṛh.⁶² Rudradāman’s reinvention of Sanskrit, which undoubtedly did “turn it into an instrument of cultural-political power of a new sort,” took place in a context where discourses of power were being borrowed, adapted, transformed, and ultimately used against each other.⁶³

One advantage to seeing this reinvention as a kind of translation is that it privileges the connections between political Sanskrit and political Middle Indic—and the literary style and ornamentation that had come to define the latter—over the connections between political Sanskrit and religious Sanskrit. We all know that Vedic and classical Sanskrit are quite different. To the question of what, specifically, makes classical Sanskrit different, our answers would have to include its courtly ethos, its aestheticized and idealized view of the world, its rich inventory of figures of sound and sense, and its use of well-defined literary styles. All of these features appear for the first time in Middle Indic inscriptions. From this perspective we can see classical Sanskrit as a translation of the expressive discourses in Middle Indic that the Sātavāhanas helped to define, promote, and patronize.⁶⁴

THE LEGACY OF THE SĀTAVĀHANAS

The Sātavāhana empire disintegrated around the second quarter of the third century CE, and over the course of the following century, what Sircar has called the “Age of Prakrit” in inscriptions—I would prefer to call it the “Age of Middle Indic”—ended as well.⁶⁵ In some places, the transition to the “Age of Sanskrit” was fairly immediate, as if all resistance to using Sanskrit as a public and political language disappeared with the Sātavāhanas themselves. The Śakas of Ujjayinī and their Ābhīra allies might have seen the demise of the Sātavāhanas as a victory for their own cultural politics. As an example, just a few steps away from the Queen’s Cave at Nāsik, a Śaka woman named Viṣṇudattā recorded a donation in Sanskrit during the reign of the Ābhīra king Māḍharīputra Īśvarasena.⁶⁶ In much of South India, however, the transition to the “Age of Sanskrit” took much longer, as the successors of the Sātavāhanas carefully negotiated their legacy. Yet even here, dynasties that began by issuing official documents in Middle Indic—the Vākāṭakas, the Kadambas, the Pallavas, the Śālaṅkāyanas—would all come to use Sanskrit for this purpose by the fifth century.

The choice to follow the cultural model of the Sātavāhanas or the Kṣatrapas of Ujjayinī, and thus to follow the “Kārlē path” or the “Nāsik path,” was an important part of this process, which we can see most clearly among the Ikṣvākus of Vijayapurī (modern Nāgārjunakoṇḍa). The Ikṣvākus were the direct successors of the Sātavāhanas in the Krishna valley of today’s Andhra Pradesh, and there are continuities in the way they represented themselves. A large number of inscriptions related to the founding of a monastic complex in the city contain a dual eulogy to the Buddha and to the founder of the Ikṣvāku dynasty, Śrī Cāntamūla, that resembles and at some points echoes the Sātavāhana inscriptions in language and style.⁶⁷ At the same time, the Ikṣvākus pursued marital alliances with the Kṣatrapas of Ujjayinī, after which there appears to be a trend toward the use of Sanskrit in inscriptions.⁶⁸ A somewhat later inscription clearly demonstrates the continuing

and parallel influence of these two families, Sātavāhanas and Kārdamakas, on the imagination of power at Vijayapurī: a local official named Śivaseba noted in Sanskrit his installation of an image of Viṣṇu Aṣṭabhujaśvāmin, “which neither the king Śaka Rudradāman of Avanti nor Viṣṇurudraśivalānanda Sātakarṇi of Vanavāsa”—belonging to a family of Sātavāhana epigones—“were able to move from its original location at Sañjayapurī.”⁶⁹ The legacy of the Sātavāhanas is explicitly invoked in other South Indian inscriptions. The Tāḷagunda inscription of the Kadambas, from the middle of the fifth century, refers to a temple that “pious kings such as Sātakarṇi, seeking to obtain the highest good, faithfully revered.”⁷⁰

Another aspect of the process of transition was the regionalization of Middle Indic. Middle Indic as a language, the Brāhmī script in which it was written, and the practices of inscription more generally were part of a cultural complex that the Sātavāhanas brought to the regions over which they ruled, although there were often preexisting traditions of inscription, and these elements remained quite stable over three centuries of Sātavāhana rule. By the middle of the third century CE, these regions were no longer subject to any centralized authority. Inscriptions in those regions continued to make use of Middle Indic and the Brāhmī script, but in ways that diverged from the transregional standards of the Sātavāhanas. What we see in a wide variety of post-Sātavāhana inscriptions, rather than the sudden emergence of regional languages, are forms of Middle Indic with amplified regional particularities, a language which was “neither wholly popular, nor entirely regulated.”⁷¹ Ikṣvāku inscriptions, for example, sometimes change initial *s* to *h*, and sometimes write etymological voiced stops as voiceless. Both are clearly features of a South Dravidian substrate.⁷² Many inscriptions of this period exhibit features that are also found in literary Prakrit, but which are more likely to be taken from the spoken language of the Central Deccan than from literary texts: the change of initial *y* to *j*, the converb in *-ūṇa*, the loss of contrast between retroflex and dental nasals, or the locative in *-amhi*.⁷³ These tendencies are neither inexorable nor irreversible: regionalisms can be found in an early inscription of Viṇhukaḍḍa Cuṭukulānanda Sātakarṇi, a ruler of northern Karnataka, but not in a later inscription of the same ruler.⁷⁴

One final trend in post-Sātavāhana inscriptions helps us to understand the transition to the “Age of Sanskrit.” Increasingly these inscriptions feature formulas, prayers, and verses, and in increasing proportions. These are the fragments of discourse that stood outside of their own time and might have been, and in fact often were, iterated across inscriptions. And these fragments are mostly written in Sanskrit: this includes seals and auspicious phrases, invocations, royal genealogies, and imprecatory verses. The most stringent discursive regularity of all is that verse of any kind, in any inscription, is in Sanskrit.⁷⁵ As we have already seen, the distinction between Sanskrit and Middle Indic engenders new discursive functions: Middle Indic becomes the language of the occasional, that which is strictly

delimited by time and place, while Sanskrit becomes the language of the permanent. This distinction clearly leads to a kind of inflation: if all inscription is meant to be permanent in some sense, then why should one ever use the language of the occasional and impermanent?⁷⁶

The outcome of these processes was the total obsolescence of Middle Indic as an inscriptional language. If it was unthinkable to use Sanskrit to commemorate political power at the beginning of the Śātavāhana empire, it was unthinkable not to use Sanskrit within a few generations of its dissolution. The way that the Śātavāhanas represented political power, however, far outlasted the languages in which they represented it. They stand at the beginning of the genealogy of political eulogy (*praśasti*) in India, a discursive form in which culture and power were co-constitutive, and thus one of the most important forms of the Sanskrit cosmopolis.⁷⁷ The influence of the Śātavāhana rulers, “whose mounts have drunk from the water of the three oceans,” can be heard even in the titles given to the Gupta emperor Candragupta II, “lord of the three oceans” and “one whose glory has tasted the water of the four oceans,” who was after all related by marriage to the Vākātakas, once feudatories of the Śātavāhanas and at the time of Candragupta II their most powerful successors.⁷⁸

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing account has implications for the way we think of two interrelated phenomena, the Sanskritization and literarization of discourse, which are important to any story we might want to tell about culture and power in premodern India.

Sanskritization is a general term for the process by which a discourse that had previously been in some other language more or less completely comes to take on features of Sanskrit. It has almost always been studied in relation to sets of evidence that are limited by medium, region, and sect, for example the birch-bark scrolls belonging to Buddhist communities in Gandhāra, although it is acknowledged to have been an “overall linguistic trend which transcended sectarian divisions.”⁷⁹ Sanskritization is still commonly described, if not quite conceptualized, as a process of “hybridization,” although the limitations and liabilities of hybridity as a governing metaphor are increasingly well known. A hybrid is often so called simply because it does not fit into the categories that we have grown accustomed to using. And often widely divergent uses of language are grouped together as constituting a “hybrid” for precisely this reason, and hence philologically and historically important distinctions are lost.⁸⁰

The tendency has been to look for Brahmans behind every process of Sanskritization, and to postulate them when they can’t be found. There are some striking contradictions and equivocations in this approach: the same Brahmans who are

said to have so vehemently resisted the “culture of writing” introduced by Buddhism, and to have declared that Sanskrit must never be written down, are also said to have somehow come to defend, not just a culture of writing, but a culture of writing Sanskrit in particular, which thereby “regained its status of a religiously legitimized literary language.”⁸¹ The developments discussed in this chapter allow us to be more specific and more circumspect about the relations between script, language, religion, and social identity.

From the perspective of the agents involved in them, it may even be inaccurate to call these processes “Sanskritization” to begin with. First, although the language practices that we identify with Sanskrit had been around for quite a long time, the recognition of those practices as constituting a distinct language with the name “Sanskrit” is in all likelihood a product of this very period.⁸² The first evidence of a clear differentiation between Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit in inscriptions is found in Uṣavadāta’s Nāsik record. Second, it was possible to produce Sanskrit-like forms simply by defaulting to the forms that would have been recognized or recognizable across the large regions that the political actors of the first and second CE traversed. And hence many of the practices we consider to be “Sanskritized” or “hybridized” do not necessarily reflect a will to write in a language called Sanskrit at all. Third, scholarship generally fails to distinguish between the preconditions and causes of Sanskritization. If Brahmins, prestige, and the need for legitimation were all these processes required, there is no reason why they should have occurred in the first and second centuries CE, or indeed why they should not be occurring right now. It is only when we look at cultural changes, and above all the creation and contestation of a poetry of politics between the Śātavāhanas and the Kṣatrapas, that we can understand the genuinely new roles that Sanskrit and its others occupied in the first century, and the complex ways in which these roles redetermined the languages that occupied them.⁸³ The evidence simply does not permit a reduction of language practices to religious determinants.

Literarization is a slightly more elusive phenomenon. In the usage of Sheldon Pollock, it is the process by which a language is rendered appropriate for literary expression, as distinguished from literization, the process by which a language is put into writing.⁸⁴ In the context of discourse as a whole, rather than of particular languages, I assign literarization a slightly different meaning: the process by which an existing discourse takes on “literary” features, whatever those features are and however they are defined, or by which a new discourse characterized by these features is created (see the conclusion to chapter 3). I have traced the literarization of the language of inscriptions, starting from the early first century BCE to the fourth and fifth centuries CE, when the authors of political inscriptions could explicitly and unproblematically call their compositions “literature” (*kāvya*). The key actors in this history are the Śātavāhanas, who were the first and among the most influential practitioners of the poetry of politics. The literarization of political discourse



FIGURE 6. Important Sātavāhana sites.

over which they presided ran parallel to the literarization of literary discourse, or in other words, the emergence of a discourse that was conscious of itself as literature. This was *pāuakavva*, Prakrit poetry, and its emergence and relation to the wider field of textual production is the subject of the following chapter.