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Hans Henrich Hock
University of Illinois, U.S.A.

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Hans Henrich Hock[a]

[a]*University of Illinois, U.S.A.*

Abstract

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

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

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

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Sanskrit, Pollock, Kāvya tradition

Introduction

A puzzle in the history of Sanskrit is that Classical-language texts, written on datable materials, first appear in early AD, after some five centuries of Prakrit inscriptions. The first authenticated Classical Sanskrit attestation is commonly believed to be the 2nd c. AD inscription of Rudradāman, ruler of the Kṣatrapas, a dynasty originating outside India. Various hypotheses have been advanced to account for these facts, generally considering the blossoming of Classical Sanskrit literature in early AD as a sudden revival. Senart (1886) proposed that Sanskrit gained wider, secular currency through Buddhists and Jains. Franke (1902) claimed that Sanskrit died out and was artificially reintroduced. Lévi (1902) argued for a usurpation of Sanskrit by the foreign Kṣatrapa rulers, who employed brahmins as administrators. Pisani (1955) instead attributed the "Sanskrit Renaissance" to the brahmins' attempt to combat these foreign invaders.

In a 1976 paper, Hock and Pandharipande surveyed these and other arguments and concluded that the "Sanskrit Renaissance" was not a 'sudden [new] use of Sanskrit for secular or literary purposes', but rather an increase in its use, especially among 'heterodox religions', and they accepted Filliozat's (1972) proposal that Sanskrit was adopted as link language 'at a time when … the overall linguistic situation [in South Asia] had become extremely complicated' (1976: 123-124).

Several recent publications reopen the debate. Ostler (2005) attributes the victory of Sanskrit to its 'cultivated, self-conscious charm' and elaborated grammar. Pollock (1996, 2006) revives the hypothesis that the early-AD public appearance of Sanskrit was a sudden event, an invention of the literary genre of praśasti (royal eulogy) and kāvya that created a new political civilization, the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis". Bronkhorst (2010 and 2011) argues that "brahmanism" spread the use of Sanskrit, as brahmins and their social order spread through India (and beyond).

Of these proposals, Ostler's is easiest to dispense with. The claim that its "charm" helped Sanskrit to victory is excessively esoteric; and while Sanskrit did have an elaborate grammatical tradition, the claim that this was responsible for the victory requires justification.

The major focus of this paper is on Pollock's proposal that the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis" was a radical innovation and to propose an alternative account. In this context, Bronkhorst's proposal provides an important alternative.

Pollock's claims and arguments

Claiming that traditional scholarship failed to explain the expanded use of Sanskrit (2006: 11), Pollock proposes that '[t]o some degree the Sanskrit "cosmopolis" … consists precisely in this common aesthetics of political culture, a kind of poetry of politics' (1996: 199-200) that, crucially, was driven by '[t]wo key inventions, the second a subspecies of the first … : kāvya, or written literature, and praśasti, or inscriptional royal panegyric' (2006: 13; see also 257-258). This "aesthetic practice" was an invention, rather than a simple resurgence (e.g. 1996: 206-207), first attested in the 2nd-century AD inscription of Rudradāman (1996: 203-204; similarly 2006: 73).

To support his claim that kāvya literature was a novel phenomenon, Pollock claims that prior to Rudradāman's "this-worldly" literature, Sanskrit was only a "sacerdotal" language (2006: 14), and that 'a stray reference in Pāṇini, a few citations in Patañjali … prove precious little' to establish an earlier use of kāvya (1996: 205, 2006: 80).

Finally, regarding the question of who initiated this "invention", Pollock is remarkably reticent. The only references I have been able to find are to 'traditional intellectuals and religious professionals, often following in the train of scattered groups of traders and adventurers' (1996: 199) and to 'peripatetic literati' (2006: 16).

Evaluation of Pollock's account

Pollock's account is interesting and provocative, but it also suffers from numerous weaknesses.

First, the idea that a whole new genre (or set of genres) could have been created ex nihilo strains credulity. There would have to have been a tradition of "this-worldly" language use and poetic sophistication that the composers of the "new" poetry could draw on, and the intended audience would need a sufficient command of "this-wordly" Sanskrit language and poetics to appreciate that poetry. Otherwise the products of Pollock's inventors would have been perceived as mere sound and fury, signifying nothing.

A second problem is Pollock's claim that traditional scholarship failed to deal with the issue of the "Sanskrit Renaissance" and that 'A stray reference in Pāṇini, a few citations in Patañjali (who never uses the term [kāvya] itself) prove precious little …'. The extensive survey of earlier literature in Hock & Pandharipande 1976[1] demonstrates a lively discussion in traditional Sanskrit studies, and this literature establishes a long tradition of secular literary use before Pollock's "Sanskrit Cosmopolis". The following expands on that survey.

Let us begin with the claim that Rudradāman's 2nd-century AD inscription is the "first public political text in Sanskrit", without precedent in earlier inscriptions. Solomon's account (1998: 72-90) paints a different picture – not a sudden break, but a slow transition from the original Prakrit inscriptions (continuing Aśoka's precedent) to increasing Sanskritization, via Sanskritized Prakrit, Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit (EHS), texts with EHS in prose but [epic] Classical Sanskrit in poetry, and finally Rudradāman. Even the latter text, 'like early literary Sanskrit generally, … shows the influence of the less formal epic-vernacular style in which some of the grammatical niceties of Pāṇinian/classical Sanskrit were not observed' (90).

Similarly, the use of kāvya and praśasti, and of ornate, "this-worldly" Sanskrit poetry in general has long-standing antecedents. Aśvaghoṣa refers to a poet Vararuci who composed six verses extolling King Nanda in the 4th century BC (Winternitz 1922: 391-392). References in Pāṇini (ca. 400 BC) suggest that the epic tradition, likewise secular (in its beginnings), started even earlier (van Buitenen 1973: xxv). Patañjali (2nd c. BC) refers to secular literature (Kielhorn 1885, Gaurinath Shastri 1960: 52-53). There is also the lighter-narrative fable tradition which may go back to about 200 BC (Hertel 1908: xiii). Finally, the Arthaśastra, going back to the 4th to 3rd c. BC (extant version: 4th c. AD), is a secular work in Classical Sanskrit (Jacobi 1911; Olivelle 2013: 25-31). Jacobi concludes that Sanskrit probably was even used at the court of Aśoka (3rd c. BC), for internal administrative or diplomatic communications, with Prakrit employed for proclamations to the general public.

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[1] The paper and some of its findings were referred to in five contributions to Houben (ed.) 1996, the volume in which Pollock's 1996 article appeared. At least for his 2006 publication, Pollock should have had access to the article and its rich bibliographical information.

Further, Patañjali cites poetic fragments in poetic metres that are not part of the Vedic tradition but of later secular literature; and the apparently contemporary Piṅgala Sūtras (Kielhorn 1885, Winternitz 1922: 33, Gaurinath Shastri 1960: 52-53) also deal with post-Vedic metres. Even the Mahābhārata, not generally recognized as ornate literature, has been argued to use poetic devices that characterize later poetic compositions (Sharma 1966). In fact, passages such as MhBh. 3.108.8-11 exhibit a great degree of phonetic play, such as the gaṅgā 'Ganges' falling gaganād 'from the heaven', alliteration in mālāṁ muktāmayīm 'a garland of pearls', or the passage toyaninadair nadantī nādam 'roaring a roar with the down-roars of water' containing different forms of the root nad- 'resound', with nadair perhaps suggesting the word nadī 'river'.

Numerous publications furnish evidence for the existence of kāvya before early AD. Patañjali (2nd c. BC) refers to a vāraruca kāvya (Kielhorn 1885, Gaurinath Shastri 1960: 52-53); and a long scholarly tradition locates kāvya literature in Middle Indo-Aryan, including Pāli, in the late centuries BC (e.g. Winternitz 1922, Lienhard 1984, Warder 1990, Jamison 2007). Jamison further cites Pali/Buddhist passages that – disapprovingly – associate kāvya with brahmanism.

This fact, combined with Patañjali's reference to a Sanskrit vāraruca kāvya and the fact that, excepting the Rāmāyaṇa, it was the brahmin-Buddhist author Aśvaghoṣa who composed the first extant Sanskrit kāvyas might suggest that even at the time of the Pali texts, there was a tradition of Sanskrit kāvya, composed by brahmins – perhaps members of the Buddhist saṅgha, but that the ornate character of their compositions was disdained by more "orthodox" Buddhists.

To sum up the findings so far: Rudradāman's inscription and its kāvya-style praśasti in Classical Sanskrit has a long prehistory. There is, thus, no reason to assume that Rudradāman's inscription and the flourishing of Sanskrit in the "Cosmopolis" constitutes a sudden invention ex nihilo. Rather, it seems advisable to look for an alternative explanation that better conforms with the evidence.

An alternative account

Let us return to Solomon's observation that not only the poetic portions of earlier inscriptions but also Rudradāman employ Sanskrit in the 'preclassical literary style current among the literati of the day', 'the less formal epic-vernacular style in which some of the grammatical niceties of Pāṇinian/classical Sanskrit were not observed' (90, emphases added). This variety of Sanskrit is characteristic of the epics, especially the Mahābhārata.

As is well known (and acknowledged in Pollock 2006: Chapter 6), the epics are foundational for Sanskrit culture in general and literature specifically, especially the Mahābhārata which, in addition to telling the great tale of the Bhāratas plus many other stories, also serves as a compendium of traditional wisdom. Moreover, its stories serve as source material for much of later literature (e.g. Lienhard 1984: 31). Given this centrality of the epics in post-Vedic culture and literature, it is not surprising that features of Epic Sanskrit were employed by the poets of the early inscriptional praśastis and dedications, as well as by Aśvaghoṣa (2nd c. AD), the first known composer of a literary kāvya.

The testimony of the Mahābhārata shows that different versions were recited at royal courts (MBh 1.1.1-19). To appreciate the epics, the royal courts had to be proficient in Sanskrit language and poetic traditions. In fact, without such informed royal patronage, it is unlikely that the epics could have been successfully transmitted.

While this provides a possible pathway through which a form of post-Vedic Sanskrit could have become a foundation for the expanded use of Sanskrit in early AD, it does not explain how and why Sanskrit spread through India (and beyond). It is here that Bronkhorst's publications provide helpful insights.

Bronkhorst's thesis is that the spread of Sanskrit results from the spread of brahmins and their language – Sanskrit. Bronkhorst argues that this spread is attributable to the fact that the brahmins offered skills and practices that rulers found to be useful and that, importantly, were not provided by the Buddhist tradition. These included secret knowledge, especially of magic spells, astrology, advice in matters of governance, and – relevant for Buddhists – ritual practices that met laypeople's needs. Further, they offered the extensive Sanskrit literature of the epics, śāstras, and fables as guidance to social order. In the process, their language became the language of royal courts. Buddhists who wanted to defend their doctrines against brahmins at the royal courts, therefore, had to – willy-nilly – become proficient in Sanskrit (2011: 39-40, 127-129, and elsewhere).

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

The characteristics of traditional Vedic education are well known (see e.g. Scharfe 2018). Based on Scharfe, supplemented by Keay 1918, Altekar 1934, and Mookerji 1947, it is possible to gain a glimpse of the less well documented nature of "secular" education.

Even traditional Vedic education could include secular elements. Thus, the brahmin Janatkumāra states that in addition to the Vedas he has studied such subjects as grammar, arithmetic, the "science of omens", and the science of weapons (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 7.1.2). Unfortunately, however, passages like this do not provide details on the method instruction. To my knowledge, the only passage that provides such information is Arthaśāstra 1.7-13, which portrays "secular" education as an extension of Vedic education. The latter starts with the ceremony of Initiation, has the study of the Vedas as its goal, requires brahmacarya 'celibacy', and ends with marriage. Secular education is added by introducing writing and arithmetic as prerequisites and by merging philosophy, economics, and politics/justice into the traditional course of study. Finally, something like "Continuing Education" includes mastery of topics not so far enumerated, including warfare, history, and the study of dharmaśāstra and arthaśāstra Now, Vedic education was imparted in Sanskrit, and by brahmins. Since the secular part of education is integrated into the Vedic curriculum, the most likely conclusion is that the entire instructional system was imparted in Sanskrit, and by brahmins. Support for this conclusion comes from the existence of Pāli texts, especially the Bhīmasenajātaka, in which future Bodhisattvas, both brahmin and kṣatriya, go to Takkasila (Takṣaśila) to study with brahmins.2

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

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2 Scharfe, therefore, is probably right in comparing similar systems of traditional education in (early) modern India.

Further, since education was conducted in Sanskrit, it required at least a working knowledge of the language by the students. The epic features of Sanskrit inscriptions up to Rudradāman may suggest that initially some of the Sanskrit employed was relatively informal, but the brahmins were guardians of the grammatical tradition and would provide instruction in "proper" grammar. As the impact of the educational system grew, adherence to grammatically "correct" Sanskrit, therefore, would grow too. This, then, can account for the fact that by the time of the Guptas, some centuries after Rudradāman, the Sanskrit of praśastis, kāvyas and all other literature generally conforms to the norms of formal grammar.

Conclusions

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

In this development, the influence of the epics played an important role, as shown by the "epic-vernacular" style of the earliest inscriptional and literary attestations. Another important factor was the role of brahmins, who provided services not covered by Buddhism, especially to royal patrons. Most important, their educational system required and thus facilitated the use of Sanskrit, and their expertise in traditional grammar stimulated an increasing use of grammatically "correct" Sanskrit.

Rudradāman and Aśvaghoṣa, with their epic-style Sanskrit, thus may be viewed, not as a radical new beginning, but as milestones in a continuing process of "Sanskritization" that culminated under the Guptas.

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