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Andrew Ollett, *Language of the Snakes. Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India*. pp. 290. Oakland: University of California Press. October 2017.—Reviewed by Lidia Wojtczak (SOAS, University of London).

Andrew Ollett's book, published in October 2017, constitutes a revised version of his Doctoral Thesis of 2015. The "biography of Prakrit from the perspective of cultural history" (p. 22) is a bold statement of the author's dedication to a close and sensitive reading of the literature of premodern South Asia. The book is divided into seven chapters, each a far-reaching and in-depth analysis of Prakrit's impact on, and interactions with, the literary culture of early India. The volume is supplemented by three valuable and illuminating appendices and by copious notes, which bring out the author's erudite approach to the subject matter.

Ollett posits that Prakrit is the "key to understanding how literary languages worked in premodern India as a whole and it provides an alternative way of thinking about language" (p. 2). As he explains Prakrit's place in the interactive linguistic framework of India at the beginning of the Common Era, Ollett distances himself from modern discussions on what stands behind the term 'Prakrit' (as opposed to 'Middle Indic') and instead looks for his definition in premodern sources. Prakrit, he tells us, "is what Prakrit texts tell us they are written in", and most generally, it is "the language of literary texts composed in the first half of the first millennium CE" (p. 14).

It was a "classical" language in many senses of the word—Prakrit texts were judged classical by the people reading them from the beginning of the Common Era and the language was cultivated as a marker of "intellectual culture", not only in India but across South and South-East Asia (p. 9).

Literature was foundational to the formation of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis"—the supra-regional, socio-political, and cultural order that Sheldon Pollock has identified as existing in the first millennium CE. As the term itself suggests, this was a phenomenon that hinged on the Sanskrit language, and it was intrinsically connected to the production of "courtly literature", *kāvya*. However, Ollett underscores the significant impact that Prakrit had on the development of *kāvya* and he proposes to take up, "an old but mostly forgotten suggestion that *kāvya* began as *kavva*, and that Sanskrit learned to be poetic from Prakrit" (p. 15).

Ollett reflects that Prakrit is a language which stubbornly refuses to conform to modern categories of language theory. This gives rise to the question of the function of Prakrit—it was not a language of a "community of speakers" or of a religious group but upheld what can only be defined as a "literary culture" (p. 18). Prakrit, much like Sanskrit, was an "artificial" language which functioned through its texts (p. 21) and both Sanskrit and Prakrit "can be the subjects of a cultural history of language, since they have been defined and deployed as cultural products all along" (p. 22). Ollett is not in favour of searching for the beginnings of Prakrit in the most ancient Indian texts (such as Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*) and instead argues that Prakrit began when it was "invented" as a language of power. This moment of creation was part and parcel of the greater emergence of a set of cultural and political practices in the context of the Sātavāhana Empire (1st c. BCE–3rd c. CE).

Ollett goes on to argue for the "invention" of Prakrit in the two following chapters. In Chapter Two, he provides the reader with a penetrative study of the earliest Sātavāhana inscriptions at the Nāṇeghāṭ Pass in the Western Ghats. The Sātavāhanas ruled over the Deccan

roughly between 50 BCE and 250 CE and, as Ollett writes, were "closely associated both with radical innovations in inscriptional discourse in this period and with the invention of Prakrit literature" (p. 27). At Nāṇeghāṭ, Śrī Sātakarṇi and his queen Nāganikā commissioned the carving of a Prakrit inscription in which *dharma* and *dakṣiṇā*, as well as the Vedic rituals of *rājasūya* and *aśvamedha* play a central role, attesting to the Sātavāhana's "vision of political power" (p. 31). Ollett remarks on the unmistakably literary nature of the inscription's language—it is characterized by long series of compounds (what would later be called *ojas*, power, by theoreticians) and by figures of both sound and sense (p. 31).

Ollett then discusses a roughly contemporaneous counter-practice of using Sanskrit in eulogistic inscriptions which was employed by the Kṣatrapas—the Scythian or Śaka kings of what is modern-day Gujarat. By referring to a pair of inscriptions sponsored by the Śaka ruler Uṣavadāta (one in Prakrit, the other in a mix of Prakrit and Sanskrit), Ollett proves that linguistic choices had a key functionality in establishing the conceptions of power in the first centuries of the Common Era and that these choices had lasting effects on the political and cultural discourse.

The changes which led Sanskrit to become *the* language of power took place, as Ollett notes, on an aesthetic vector and were not influenced by religious concerns. He refutes the theory that Sanskrit went "hand-in-hand" with Brahmanization, pointing out that the early Brahminical society had never expressed itself as a *political* or *cultural* entity in Sanskrit. In fact, as Ollett argues, Brahmins would have been strongly against the use of the language of the gods by foreign invaders such as the Kṣatrapas (pp. 37–41).

Ollett challenges the role of Sanskrit as a legitimizing agent and questions the importance of Sanskritization in creating a language of politics. He points to the contradictions which arise when one links Sanskritization to the Brahmanization of cultural discourse. He writes that, "[i]t is only when we look at cultural changes, and above all the creation and contestation of a poetry of politics between the Sātavāhanas

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" (p. 48). In the conclusion to Chapter Two, Ollett also proposes to look at the processes taking place in the India of the Sātavāhanas and Kṣatrapas through the lens of "literarization" which he defines as "the process by which an existing discourse takes on 'literary' features" (p. 48).

Chapter Three, "Inventing Prakrit: The Languages of Literature", centres on the importance of Jain Prakrit literature. Ollett proposes that the hitherto held, reductive divide of early Prakrit into "Jain" and "courtly" Prakrit has skewed our understanding of the analogies between texts such as the "non-Jain" *Sattasaī* and the "Jain" *Taraṅgavatī* (p. 51). In presenting his vision of the interconnected and multi-lingual emergence of poetic language in India, Ollett coins the phrase "*kāvya* movement" which he understands as "a cultural-political formation, lasting roughly from the second to the twelfth century and spreading over much of southern Asia, that was imagined through the universalizing discourses of Sanskrit" (p. 52).

The following sections deal with the beginnings of Prakrit literature and the main differences that are seen to exist between Jain and non-Jain Prakrit works (formal, thematic, linguistic, contextual). Ollett emphasizes that these differences were not present in the earliest stages of the development of Prakrit literature and proceeds to an in-depth analysis of the *Sattasaī*—theories on its dating, its self-representation (p. 59), its literary and ideological context, and its courtliness.

The *Sattasaī*, composed in the court of the Sātavāhana king Hāla, was a starting point for the courtly Prakrit poem and Ollett uses its analysis to form the groundwork for questions about the beginnings of Jain Prakrit literature. He discusses three accepted constants of Jain literature: its continuity with Jain teachings; the continuity "between Jain language practices and demotic, 'everyday' language practices"; and the identification of Jain language practices as Prakrit (pp. 69–72). Ollett studies the development of literature composed in

"Jain Māhārāṣṭrī" with special focus on the language of the earliest commentarial traditions. He then moves on to examine Pālitta's *Taraṅgavatī*, a versed Prakrit novel, which survives only in abridgments, and which he refers to as, "the missing piece that links the two histories of Prakrit literature to each other" (p. 77). Pālitta was a Jain poet associated with Hāla, compiler of the *Sattasaī*. This association, together with the features of the *Taraṅgavatī*, show that in Pālitta's times, "the courtly and the Jain histories of Prakrit are crossed, or rather, they have not yet been separated from each other" (p. 79).

Ollett's most important conclusion in this chapter is that the erotic courtly Prakrit texts and the more didactic Jain Prakrit poetry cooperated in the creation of the "new discursive phenomenon" that was Prakrit literature. He zeroes in "on a moment when Prakrit literature was given the form that it would take for more than a millennium afterwards" (p. 82), and positions it as the point of origin of a literarized Prakrit—"of new discursive spheres, new genres and practices to occupy them, and new disciplines to regulate them" (p. 83).

Chapter Four, "The Forms of Prakrit Literature", aims to discuss Prakrit "phenomenology and aesthetics" without contrasting them with their Sanskrit counterparts (p. 85). Ollett examines various approaches towards literary language and observes once again that Prakrit cannot be forced into any of the existing moulds. He then presents his readers with what made Prakrit a literary language according to the people using it—"sweet syllables", "quavering rhythm" and "unbound character" (p. 87). The section on the first is an examination of the phonetic characteristics of the Prakrit language—the scarcity of consonants, combined with the predominance of open, vowel sounds gives the impression of musicality (pp. 88–94). The section *Quavering Verses* is an advanced study of Prakrit versification and the omnipresent and versatile *gāthā* metre, which was also employed in sung verse and further added to the poetry's melodiousness (pp. 94–102). In *Inexhaustible Collections* (pp. 102–110), Ollett notices that most Prakrit *gāthā* verses were poems in themselves. This allowed the majority of Prakrit poetry to exist in anthologies of single stanzas and "encouraged

poems to circulate promiscuously, to appear in diverse contexts, to mean different things to different people" (p. 110).

Ollett is inspired by Immanuel Kant and, especially, Naoki Sakai to adopt a schema in an attempt to describe the language order of premodern India in Chapter Five, "Figuring Prakrit". He notes that this is a novel approach towards language in the Indological context, which tends to favour sociolinguistic methods (p. 112). Ollett outlines four main features of what he calls the "archetypal schema": "the opposition between Sanskrit and Prakrit; the identity of Sanskrit and Prakrit; the totality of the practices the schema represents; and the iterability of its distinctions" (p. 114). As he takes his readers through these four points in the following sections (pp. 114–135), Ollett brings out the interconnectedness of the representations of languages in premodern India. His schema "supplies the basic categories—including the languages themselves—and calibrates a complex set of relations, constituting a framework within which language can be thought" (p. 139).

The study of Prakrit as an object of knowledge forms the core of Chapter Six, "Knowing Prakrit". This includes knowledge of the place of Prakrit texts within literary traditions, as well as the traditions of knowledge about Prakrit as a language (Prakrit grammar). Ollett points out that knowledge of Prakrit was "philological" and that it was "not a 'model of' a linguistic reality with an independent existence, but a 'model for' the continuous recreation—through reading, commenting, anthologizing, recombining, and composing anew—of literary traditions" (p. 142).

What follows is an exhaustive "archaeology" of Prakrit knowledge, "an attempt to construct a historical narrative on the basis of texts that resist it: lost texts, fragmentary texts, poorly preserved texts, corrupt texts, authorless texts, imaginary texts, mythical texts" (p. 144). Ollett draws on many Prakrit sources but focuses mainly on Vararuci's *Prākṛtaprakāśa*, the earliest, fully extant Prakrit grammar. He reiterates Luigia Nitti-Dolci's observation that this is not a grammar of a language in the broader sense, but a grammar of the "Prakrit literary tradition, represented above all by *Seven Centuries*" (p. 148). Ollett launches into

a study of the textual history of the *Prākṛtaprakāśa*, emphasizing what he believes to be a liminal point in "Prakrit knowledge", i.e. the addition of chapters on other languages, namely Māgadhī and Śaurasenī, which represent "a pluralization of the category of 'Prakrit'" (p. 150).

The final section of this chapter, *Grammar, Metagrammar and the Regional*, deals with the conventions of Prakrit grammar, most prominently with its three core categories of *tatsama*, *tadbhava* and *deśī* (Ollett prefers "meta-grammar" for these) which have their beginnings in Daṇḍin's *Kāvyādarśa*. Prakrit is then contextualized in its relationship with the vernacular languages of premodern India and Ollett reflects on its role in the "Vernacular Millennium". Prakrit, he argues, provided the model for vernacular languages to become not only literized but also literarized, i.e. refined to serve the purposes of literature (p. 161); it proved that there could exist a "counterpractice to Sanskrit" (p. 164).

Ollett opens Chapter Seven, "Forgetting Prakrit", with an extremely useful and clear summary of his dense and wide-ranging work. He goes on to dispute the narrative of Prakrit's "decline", noting some key points that have been overlooked by those who accept this narrative. He proposes to analyse this complex process from multiple points of view. The first of these is the perspective of "displacement", which he understands as "Prakrit's displacement from a position of importance both in actual practices and in the conceptual ordering of these practices" (p. 174). Another process that influenced Prakrit's loss of importance was "vernacularization", in which vernacular languages edged Prakrit out of the "schema of co-figuration" *vis-à-vis* Sanskrit (p. 175). These processes enabled, or perhaps encouraged, the push to create abridgments of Prakrit literature and to translate Prakrit works into Sanskrit (pp. 178–180).

Ollett highlights that the processes of "displacement, abridgment and translation all point to the precarious position that Prakrit had going into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries" (p. 180). Although Prakrit's role continued to diminish, over the following centuries many commentaries and treatises of Prakrit grammar were written in "important centers of political and intellectual power, and some were produced

by the most learned scholars of their age" (p. 181). Scholars retained interest in reworking and re-conceptualising the knowledge of this "dying language" because it was a marker of "philological expertise" (p. 184), which Ollett demonstrates on the example of Ghanaśyāma's *Ānandasundarī* (18th c. CE), a Prakrit romantic comedy (*saṭṭaka*).

In the opening pages of his book, Andrew Ollett writes that Prakrit "is the most important Indian language you've never heard of" (p. 14). However even for those of us fully aware of the existence and of the importance of Prakrit in the cultural discourse of premodern India, "The Language of the Snakes" is eye-opening. Ollett does not hesitate to question the hitherto functioning theories and terminology connected with the hybridity of languages, Brahmanization, Sanskritization and legitimization, to name a few. Instead, he provides much more sophisticated and thoughtful interpretations of the necessarily complicated linguistic, political and cultural landscape of India in the early centuries of the Common Era. He reads texts not in isolation but as part of a greater and more byzantine structure of webs of influence and does not settle for reductive answers to the most perplexing questions.