

Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India. By ANDREW OLLETT. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. xi, 308 pp. ISBN: 9780520296220 (paper).
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Prakrit is one of the most significant classical languages of India, “a language without a people and without a place,” and, certainly, as Andrew Ollett puts it, “the most important language you’ve never heard of” (pp. 3, 14). *Language of the Snakes*—a title taken from Mīrzā Khān’s remark describing Prakrit as *nāg-bānī* in his seventeenth-century grammar of Braj Bhāṣā in Persian—is a landmark study of why and how this particular language occupies the role it does in the “language order” of ancient and medieval India.

Ollett explores in seven chapters how Prakrit (often incorrectly conflated with the entire range of Middle-Indic languages, between Vedic Sanskrit and the modern vernaculars) fits in a historical narrative often dominated, in the first millennium CE, by Sanskrit and then, throughout the second millennium and into the modern period, by the numerous regional literary languages of premodern India. While offering careful analyses of some thirteen centuries of Prakrit culture’s linguistic features, literary effects, and scholarly commentaries and digests, Ollett patiently unravels the prejudiced lens through which these aspects have been misinterpreted by scholars of the past two centuries. The language may justifiably be considered “artificial” and “derivative,” or “sweet” and even “popular,” but not, according to Ollett, the way that many nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars of the language understood these descriptors.

To counteract these views and establish a new analytical paradigm for Prakrit studies that explains how the language was “invented,” “formed,” “figured,” “known,” and then “forgotten,” Ollett weaves his presentation around inscriptional evidence (mostly from the Sātavāhana period); a variety of linguistic facts about different aspects of Prakrit (morphology, syntax, and especially metrics, for which this book is an excellent scholastic resource on account of Ollett’s marvelous grasp of the subject); specific examples from literary, scholastic, and grammatical primary sources; and modern scholarship in various languages. Particularly important here are Ollett’s broad discussions about Prakrit’s perceived secondary status, as a “both-and” and “neither-nor” language in relation to Sanskrit and other Indian languages. He also spends considerable energy to broaden the perception that Prakrit has a limited genre-specific relevance. Most students of Indian languages and literature associate Prakrit with character dialogues in the Sanskrit drama, as the preeminent language for *kavva* or *kāvya* and especially lyrical verse and song, or as the primary vehicle for sectarian (largely Jain and Buddhist) creative impulses. By identifying Prakrit’s contribution to Indian scholastic culture (especially poetics) and its outsized role in shaping, or rather “catalyzing,” the vernacular dominance of late medieval and modern South Asia, *Language of the Snakes* aims to reorient scholars of Indian premodernity to think in more complex ways about the possibilities for theorizing “local” and “popular” in wholly novel ways.

In mapping the historical vicissitudes of Prakrit, Ollett offers a clear trajectory. Rising as a “language of power” with the Sātavāhanas, Prakrit goes on to establish the *kāvya/kavva* tradition with its courtly aesthetic which, in turn, inspires Sanskrit to follow suit. In this history, the *Sattasai* (Seven centuries) is a foundational text but so are lesser-known works, like the Jain *Taraṅgavatī*. Relating to Jain Prakrit, Ollett argues that rather than it being an outlier, it may have been central to Prakrit literary culture. In relation to Sanskrit, Ollett finds Prakrit to be a “complementary” language practice, in terms of its being transregional, transreligious, and firmly installed in a courtly idiom despite its

role in representing the lives of less-educated people. One of Ollett's arguments, for example, is to read the "two histories of Prakrit literature" (courtly/Brahminical or popular/Jain) together yet in tension, a theme that takes Prakrit literary culture as the "common property of groups that had mutually exclusive religious commitments, and were thus a site of intense appropriation, contestation, and exclusion" (p. 53). A similar argument for Prakrit literature's complexity as a cultural practice holds for its courtly contexts and so-called representation of the "popular," a discussion couched in a larger part of Ollett's treatment of the classic *Sattasai*.

Related to the latter, and Prakrit *kavva* more generally, is Prakrit's distinctive negotiation of "musicality" and "indeterminacy," two aspects embodied as much by Prakrit language's essential morphology, phonetics, semantic ambiguities, and metrical elasticity as by the creative ways that poets in the language have put these features to use. Particularly dense and, therefore, worthwhile are Ollett's discussions of Prakrit textuality (is there a "core" to the *Sattasai* based on its recensions?); hermeneutics (Prakrit's "crooked language/clever speech" [*vakrokti*], for instance); sociology (its links with power, region, and community); and grammatical self-reflection, as well as its role as a cultural practice different from that of Sanskrit grammar. According to Ollett, what distinguishes Prakrit is its mediating role through the instruments of grammar, lexicography, metrics, and various genres like the *sattaka* to draw together the regional languages of premodern India with Apabhraṃśa and Sanskrit. Just as Sanskrit found a literary identity for itself in relation to Prakrit and learned the art of courtly poetry from it, so too did regional-language poets find a voice, as it were, through Prakrit.

Language of the Snakes is a must-read for specialists of Indian literature. And, despite the flood of information Ollett gives and the subtle arguments he makes, an admirable knack for clarity makes the book accessible to nonspecialists as well. One minor issue is that there are some original titles that are not translated at all while others are *only* translated in the body of the work. The reader will need to go to the bibliography to decipher Ollett's idiosyncratic oscillation between giving only the Sanskrit/Prakrit title in some cases or only the English translation in others. Useful appendices offer the reader a survey of relevant inscriptions and fragments from early Prakrit grammars. The notes are also worth consulting, as important information, lively translations, and scholastic histories are provided there.

DEVEN M. PATEL

University of Pennsylvania
devenp@sas.upenn.edu

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There is no dearth of literature on US policy toward India and South Asia. A number of historians have dealt with specific epochs, former diplomats have written narrative accounts, and journalists have discussed ties during particular administrations. If the extant literature had a lacuna it was the absence of a sweeping history of American involvement in the subcontinent. That gap has now been effectively addressed with