

XXII.

IN WHAT DEGREE WAS SANSKRIT A SPOKEN
LANGUAGE?

AN ESSAY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SANSKRIT LANGUAGE.

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THERE must have been in ancient India three thousand years ago, as there are in the India of to-day, many languages and many dialects of these languages. Unfortunately, there was no Linguistic Survey and no Dr. Grierson in those days; and of all of these save one—the language of the earliest Aryan settlers in the north-western corner of India—we have to say, “their memorial is perished with them.”¹

At the root of the question which we are to discuss, lies the question whether some break of continuity occurred in the history of the one language of which we possess this early record, or whether its development proceeded in the regular manner which we can observe elsewhere in the linguistic history of other countries.

Accordingly as we hold one or the other of these views, so shall we be inclined to regard the later predominant literary language of India, which is, without dispute, closely related *etymologically* with this early language, as a purely

¹ For a later period—the period beginning about 300 B.C.—we are more fortunate in possessing records of several other members of the Indian group of the same Aryan or Indo-European family. Between these languages there is a strong family resemblance, and their intimate connection with the earliest recorded language cannot be doubted. At the same time, it would not be strictly accurate to say of most of them that they were derived from this earliest recorded language. They were derived rather from earlier spoken languages which have passed away without record.

scholastic artificial revival—something like the revival of Latin as a general means of communication among the learned in mediæval Europe—or as the legitimate descendant of the earlier language. In the former case we shall be inclined to deny to the later language the character of a spoken language in the ordinary sense of the term; in the latter case we shall see no reason to suppose that, like other languages which have attained to a fixed literary form—our own, for instance—it did not remain in use also as a spoken language.

The latter view—the view that there was no such break of continuity in the development of Sanskrit, that it was the legitimate descendant of the earliest recorded Aryan language of India, and that, after having been reduced to a definite literary form by the labours of grammarians, it continued to be used as a spoken language by the cultivated classes over a very considerable portion of Northern India—is the one to which a consideration of the whole subject has led me.

The old theory, originally propounded by that great scholar Max Müller, but, I believe, abandoned by him before his death, that, during the few centuries before and after Christ, India passed through a period which may be compared to the Dark Ages of Europe, during which the use of Sanskrit was in abeyance, and which was followed, as in Europe, by a *renaissance* at which a knowledge of the classics was revived—this theory has been completely disproved by evidence of various kinds, but above all by the absolutely certain evidence of inscriptions which can be dated.

Another reason for assuming some such interruption in the use of Sanskrit has been suggested by Prof. Bhandarkar, who is quoted with approval by Professor Rhys Davids in his book “Buddhist India.”¹ The use of Sanskrit in its earlier stages is, without question, most closely connected with Brahmanism; and Professor Bhandarkar, relying on

¹ p. 150.

the evidence of inscriptions, gives reasons for supposing that Brahmanism itself was under a cloud during, approximately, the same period which was formerly supposed to intervene between the latest of the Vedic writings and 'Classical' Sanskrit. The evidence of inscriptions on this particular point is, however, rather apt to be misleading, since so many come from ascetics' caves and stūpas, institutions which seem not to have been so popular amongst the Brahmans as amongst the Jains and Buddhists; but, apart from this fact, we actually do find that mention of Brahmans and Brahmanical communities is quite common in inscriptions throughout this period. Aśoka (c. 250 B.C.) mentions Brahmans in association with the adherents of the other religious sects of his time.¹ His grandson, Daśaratha, has left us inscriptions awarding or confirming certain privileges to the Ājīvikas, who, according to Kern and Bühler, were a sect of Brahman ascetics.² The great Andhra inscription at Nānāghāt (c. 170 B.C.) consists of a formal record of the performance of Brahmanical sacrifices, such as we know them from the Sūtras, and, by its statements of the enormous fees paid to the officiating priests, impresses us with the extent of the priestly power at this period.³ Among the inscriptions of the Kṣatrapas, who succeeded to the dominion of the Andhras in Western India, are those of Uṣavadāta, son-in-law of Nahapāna (c. 120 A.D.), in which numerous grants are made to Brahmans and Brahmanical communities.⁴

Leaving out of the question the evidence of such literary works as may reasonably be assigned to this period, and turning to the coins which can be dated with more exactness, we find Brahmanical figures among the earliest 'types' of Indian coins (as distinguished from the 'symbols' of the earliest Indian 'punch-marked' currency, and as distinguished from the Greek 'types' introduced by the Græco-Indian

¹ Edict VII; v. V. A. Smith, *Aśoka*, p. 155.

² Bühler, *Ind. Ant.*, 1891, p. 361. Professor Bhandarkar, however, denies that the Ājīvikas were Brahmans, v. JBRRAS., 1901, p. 399.

³ Bühler in ASWI. v, p. 60.

⁴ Nāsik and Karle Inserr. in ASWI. iv.

princes). These probably date from c. 100 B.C.¹ For the following centuries, such exceedingly common types as the figure of Śiva, with or without his bull, or the goddess Lakṣmī, can only denote that Brahmanism was widely spread throughout Northern India.

Everything, I think, points to the fact that there was no such break of continuity as has been imagined, either in the history of the Brahmanical religion or in the use of the Sanskrit language; and, if there was no dividing chasm between 'Vedic' and 'Classical' Sanskrit, it is difficult—in my opinion it is impossible—to understand why or at what period the language once spoken should have ceased to be used as a spoken language, or why the ordinary course of development, which we may observe in the case of other great literary languages, should have been interrupted, until there came that tremendous political and religious cataclysm which resulted in a transfer of the predominant power from the Hindu to the Muhammadan.

In seeking to obtain from the literature itself an answer to the question "In what degree was Sanskrit (i.e. Classical Sanskrit, Sanskrit properly so called) a spoken language?" we must observe the ordinary principles of historical criticism. We must view the history of the Sanskrit language as a whole, so far as possible, so that we may see what the course of its development has been, and we must compare it with the history of other languages.

For a study of development no other literature of the Indo-European family of languages presents more abundant materials or greater continuity in its materials. The earliest hymn of the Rig-Veda cannot, in all probability, have been composed later than about 1500 B.C., and from that remote date down to the present day there has probably been no period in which Sanskrit (in the wider sense of the term, including the language of both the Vedic and the Classical periods) has not been used, to some extent, both for the

¹ *E.g.* coins of the Audumbara king Dharaghoṣa, *v. Indian Coins*, § 43, pl. iii, 8.

purposes of literature and, at the same time, as a spoken language. Although for many centuries past it has been in India little more than the language of learned commentary and learned communication, like Latin in mediæval Europe, yet its creative period cannot be held to have been closed until after 1000 A.D. The language which we propose to survey to-day had, therefore, a literary activity which extended over the long space of at least twenty-five centuries.

But no account of the literary language of any country can be satisfactory if it does not include some estimate of its relation to the dialects which sprang from the same source, which continue to exist side by side with it during a considerable period of its history, and which, with the natural conservatism of dialects, often preserve forms and inflexions which it has lost. We shall, therefore, take a glance at the history of some of the more important dialects of ancient and mediæval India; and, in attempting to determine the relation which these Prakrits, as they are commonly called, bore to Sanskrit, we shall again find that the most instructive analogies are supplied by the dialects of other Indo-European languages with which we are familiar.

Investigation has shown that certain well-defined linguistic strata are to be recognised in the Rig-Veda, the earliest Sanskrit which we possess, and that the composition of the hymns which are now contained in it must have extended over a long period. The subject-matter of the hymns themselves shows that the greater number of them, including all the oldest, were composed in the north-western portion of India—the country of the Indus and its tributaries. They are anterior to the extension of Aryan civilization to the country of the Ganges and the Jamna. The fact that the early Vedic Sanskrit thus prevailed during a long period in the north-west is of primary importance for the subsequent history of Sanskrit. It was precisely in this region that Pāṇini subsequently composed his great work, which, summing up the results of generations of grammatical study, fixed for all succeeding ages the form of the language

which we know as 'Classical' Sanskrit. It is in accordance with this fact, too, that the dialect of the still later Kharoṣṭhi inscriptions of the same region still retains characteristics which it shares with Classical Sanskrit, and in regard to which it differs from the dialects of Central and Eastern India.¹

This earliest Vedic Sanskrit is entirely in poetry, and it must have differed, no doubt, from the spoken language of the period in the same manner as poetic diction in every age and country has differed from the language of ordinary life; but there is no reason whatever for supposing that it was farther removed from the speech of the Aryan settlers in North-Western India than the poetry of Chaucer was removed from the spoken English of his time.

As regards its structure, we may, perhaps, most fittingly compare it with the earliest Greek which has come down to us—the Greek of the Homeric poems. Both languages are characterised especially by their wealth of inflexional forms; and this great variety in the means of expression is no doubt due to the same causes in both instances. It may be partly explained as the result of a mixture of dialects and of the retention in a poetic language of forms which have passed out of ordinary currency; but there can be no doubt that it is also characteristic generally of early stages of language. At a later stage, literature, by creating a standard, tends to produce greater uniformity; and at a later stage still, when language and literature have themselves become objects of study, 'grammar' comes in to prune away all useless luxuriance, and, by authorising certain forms and condemning others, to set up a distinction, which did not previously exist, between what is 'correct' and what is 'incorrect.'

The literature of the later Vedic period is enormous in extent. Opinions may differ as to its value from the literary point of view; but from the linguistic point of view, which chiefly concerns us here, it is inestimable. The diversity of its language and style shows that it must be the product

¹ Franke, *Pāli und Sanskrit*, p. 54.

of many centuries—possibly of a period extending from c. 1000 B.C. to c. 200 B.C.—and probably also of very widely separated localities. This vast literature has not yet been completely explored; but all the investigations which have been made point to one certain conclusion, viz., that, in this literature, the transition from the language of the Rig-Veda to Classical Sanskrit can be most clearly and unmistakeably traced. Indeed, it is practically impossible to say where the one ceases and the other begins. The relative dates of works included in this period may be settled by linguistic evidence; and there can be no doubt that investigation will eventually show that different dialects are represented.¹

Now, a language which changes in this definite and orderly manner is certainly not dead. Changes such as we have noted can only come about through the influence of the living speech, and this influence can only be exerted when there is not too great a difference between the literary and the spoken forms. There would seem, then, to be no sufficient reason for doubting the continuity of a spoken Sanskrit throughout the later, as well as the earlier, Vedic period.² There is very good evidence, I think, to show that this continuity was not broken, and that, during the Classical period, a spoken Sanskrit continued to exist side by side with the literary language, differing from it only as our every-day language differs from the language of our books.

The most important link in the argument here is supplied by the works of the grammarians. They themselves belong to the later Vedic period, and the result of their labours was,

¹ Linguistically the Sanskrit of the Brāhmaṇa period is to be compared to the Greek of the Classical period, when great writers show the most marked individuality in language and style.

² Why Professor Rhys Davids (*Buddhism*, 1903, p. 254), while allowing that the language of the Vedic hymns represents in literary form the contemporary spoken language, denies that this is true of the productions of the later Vedic or Brāhmaṇa period, I cannot understand. He admits that the language of this later Vedic period shows "traces of development." But this is precisely the criterion of a living language, and of a living language unfixed yet by the strict rules of the grammarians. The mediæval Latin in Europe, and the Pali of the commentaries, to which he compares it, do *not* change in the same way. Their form is definitely fixed. Their inflexions remain the same throughout. Slight variations in their vocabularies, slight differences in the meanings and uses of words, are almost the only marks by which the productions of different periods can be distinguished.

as we know from their own works, the elaboration from the living spoken language of their time of that precise form of it which we know as Classical Sanskrit. To understand the full force of their evidence it will be necessary to glance at the history of grammatical studies in India.

Grammar, like astronomy, mathematics, and every other science in ancient India, had its origin in the study of the Veda; and its very name, *vyākaraṇa*, 'analysis,' indicates the method pursued. Its first beginning is seen in the *Pada-pāṭha* or 'word-text' of the Rig-Veda, ascribed to Śākalya, c. 700 B.C. This first effort is confined to an analysis of the connected sentence into its constituent parts. The words of the hymns are taken separately and presented in the form which they would bear when not influenced by their surroundings, i.e. as they would appear both in regard to form and accent if unmodified by the laws of euphony. A subordinate division was also made of compound-words into their constituent parts, and of certain noun-forms into base and termination; and, at the same time, such forms were indicated as resisted the ordinary rules of euphony or were otherwise remarkable. This *pada-pāṭha*, simple as it may seem to us now, formed a very real beginning of grammatical study. It constituted the basis of all subsequent research. This analytical method applied first to the earliest language of the Veda, was subsequently extended to the language of the age, and was pursued with such wonderful thoroughness and exactness that it resulted in what is beyond question the most minutely perfect system of grammar that the world has ever seen.¹ Among the grammarians the greatest names are those of Yāska, c. 500 B.C., whose *Nirukta* or 'Explanation' of the Vedic language may be considered as, perhaps, the earliest known example of the use of strict Classical Sanskrit prose, and Pāṇini, c. 350 B.C., whose grammar of the spoken literary language of his day dominates all succeeding Sanskrit literature.

¹ It is always interesting to compare the parallel developments in the civilizations of ancient Greece and India. For the history of Greek grammar, r. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, vol. i, p. 88.

Pāṇini expressly calls the language with which he deals *laukika*, "that which is used in ordinary life," and distinguishes it from the *chāndasa* or 'poetical' language of the Vedas; and the grammarians generally from Yāska to Patañjali (latter half of the second century B.C.) apply to Classical Sanskrit the term *bhāṣā* or 'speech,' from the root *bhāṣ* 'to speak'—a term which could not possibly have been used to denote a dead language. The evidence that the language with which they deal was a real living spoken language is overwhelming. Rules as to the accent of words, as to the precise intonation of questions or commands, as to forms used when shouting to people at a distance, as to colloquialisms used in playing dice, etc., could have no sense if applied to a dead language.

Most important for the history of the living Sanskrit should be the evidence of the great early Epic poems—the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa. Unfortunately we cannot estimate the real value of the evidence of the Mahābhārata, until we are supplied with that great desideratum of Sanskrit scholarship, a critical edition of the text which will enable us to distinguish between the more ancient and the more modern portions of the poem. But that certain portions of both of them are very early indeed is, I think, clearly shown by their language. There can be little doubt, I think, that the greater part of the Rāmāyaṇa, in the form in which we possess it now, must date from about 500 B.C.; and the oldest parts of the Mahābhārata must be of at least equal age. Poems of the kind are often referred to in the literature of the later Vedic or Brāhmaṇa period, and we have actual quotations from such works in the Mahābhāṣya (second century B.C.). The evidence of the Epics is the more important as their language does not entirely conform to the scholastic rules of the grammarians. They are, therefore, independent corroborative witnesses to the use of Sanskrit. It is quite inconceivable that they should not have been popular in character, and, as a matter of fact, the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas are often spoken of as constituting a sort of fifth Veda which should be

studied by ordinary worldly people, warriors, husbandmen, and ladies, just as the four Vedas and the Brahmanical literature founded on them were studied by the priests. The evidence of the Purāṇas also cannot unfortunately be properly used at present. In their origin they probably belong to a very early period, but in their present form they are undoubtedly late. There seems, however, to be no reason for supposing that these Purāṇas are not the representatives of a continuous traditional use of Sanskrit as a popular language, although the earlier stages in this tradition have been lost.

We are, therefore, fully justified in regarding Classical Sanskrit as the legitimate descendant of the language spoken by the early Aryan settlers in the north-western regions of India. Pāṇini himself belonged to this district, and, as we have seen, the dialect of the later Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, which are confined to this district in India, still continues to show in its structure a notable affinity to Sanskrit. Spreading from this region with the spread of Brahmanism, Sanskrit became the literary language, first of the whole of Northern India, and subsequently of the whole of the civilized Aryan world in India.

In the history of languages there are many instances of a similar growth and expansion. In our own country, the wealth and political predominance of the south-eastern portion of Great Britain led to the predominance of the Mercian dialect of English, which, reduced to its final literary form chiefly by the great writers of the Elizabethan age and by the authorised version of the Bible, became the standard English language, which has spread over the whole English-speaking world. The chief dialect of ancient Greece, the Attic, became, through the political unity which resulted from the Macedonian conquest, the *κοινὴ διάλεκτος* of the whole Greek world, and remained so, with little change, until Greek learning was extinguished by the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in A.D. 1453. Similarly, Latin, the dialect spoken at Rome, was chosen from among all the dialects of Italy to become the universal language of culture throughout

the empire. Its form as settled by the writers of the Classical period remained substantially unchanged through many centuries; and after its literary productiveness had ceased, it, like Sanskrit in India, continued to exist as the common means of communication among the learned in Europe.

Let us now turn to the Prakrits, the other Aryan dialects of ancient India, and examine the position which they held in regard to Sanskrit, the predominant literary language. These Prakrits cannot, unfortunately, be traced back to any date within many centuries of the period of the earliest Vedic Sanskrit, or to the period of the Brāhmaṇas, or even to the date of the earliest Classical Sanskrit (Yāska, c. 500 B.C.) or the earliest Sanskrit of the Epics; but, as the general study of dialects would lead us to expect, they often retain forms which are much older, much nearer to Vedic Sanskrit, than the corresponding forms of the literary language. In precisely the same manner—to take an example from our own country—our own dialects, the dialect of Somerset for instance, still abound in words which are nearer to Anglo-Saxon than those used in cultivated and literary English.

The transformation of a dialect into a widespread, cultivated, literary language, which then tends to absorb the dialects which were once its fellows, follows from the importance with which it has been invested by the force of circumstances, usually political or religious. The development and growth of Sanskrit were due to the spread of Brahmanism and to the alliance which, with some notable exceptions, was generally maintained between the priestly and the kingly power. In a similar manner, though in a smaller degree, such a combination of religious and political causes led to the development of other great literary languages from Aryan dialects in ancient India, such as Pali, the language of what is incorrectly but very conveniently called 'Southern' Buddhism, and Jaina-Māhārāṣṭrī and Jaina-Śaurasenī, the languages of Jainism.

Buddhism was, no doubt, first preached in the popular

dialect of Buddha's country—Magadha, the present Behar—a dialect which is known to us, some two and a half centuries later than Buddha's date, from the inscriptions of Aśoka, the great Maurya king of Magadha. The literary Pali of the Buddhist books, whatever its origin may have been, is almost certainly not derived from this particular dialect; and, however good the authority of the Pali books may be for matters of fact and matters of doctrine in the earliest Buddhist age—the latter part of the sixth and the earlier part of the fifth centuries B.C.—they are no evidence for the *language* either of Buddha's age or of Buddha's country. That this language was nearly allied to Pali is of course practically certain; but the two were allied merely as collateral descendants from the same stock, and not otherwise. Pali in its present form represents the Indian dialect, whatever it may have been, which was introduced with Buddhism into Ceylon, possibly as early as the third century B.C., and which had been reduced to literary form by the labours of grammarians in precisely the same manner as Classical Sanskrit. Its form, like that of Classical Sanskrit, had already been finally fixed, and it underwent no material modification during the centuries through which its history can be traced. It is exceedingly probable that it assumed this definite literary form only after it had found a permanent home as the language of the state religion of Ceylon. All the Buddhist literature which must once have existed in the Indian dialect which formed the basis of the literary Pali has disappeared. Practically all that we know of the literary *media* through which Buddhism was promulgated in India proper is: (1) That Buddhism seems everywhere to have used the prevailing language; (2) that, in accordance with this principle, Aśoka, the king of Magadha c. 250 B.C., in quoting known Buddhist texts, gives their titles in Māgadhi and not in Pali, while Buddhist countries farther north, such as Nepal, accepted Sanskrit as the language of their scriptures at least as early as the first or second century of our era; (3) that, in the time of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tshang, c. 640 A.D., Sanskrit

had so completely become the language of Indian Buddhism that it was used even in theological discussions.¹

The history of the Jain scriptures is precisely similar. They have not come down to us in the language in which they were, no doubt, originally preached — the dialect of Vaiśālī, the modern Besārḥ, north-east of Patna. The languages in which they are preserved are those of the countries in which Jainism became politically important. These languages, like Pali and Classical Sanskrit, found their own grammarians and produced enormous literatures. They continued to hold their own until some time between 1000 and 1100 A.D., when they were forced to yield to Sanskrit, which thenceforth takes its place as the language of the Jain church.

For the history of Indian dialects the evidence of inscriptions and coin-legends is more satisfactory than that of literature. The earliest inscriptions which can be dated with certainty are the edicts of Aśoka, c. 250 B.C.; but there are some inscriptions, and possibly also a few coin-legends, which may belong to a somewhat earlier period. In any case, from the time of Aśoka onwards, the inscriptions and coin-legends furnish us with a continuous record, which, from the linguistic point of view, is of the utmost importance.

Now, it is essential to the very nature of an inscription or a coin-legend that it should be written in the ordinary language of the common people for whose information it is intended. It is, therefore, anything but surprising to find that all the earliest Indian inscriptions and coin-legends are in popular dialects, and that this use of the dialects extends to a period subsequent to that at which, as we have every reason to believe, Sanskrit had been generally accepted as the cultivated language of religion, politics, and culture. The history of the Greek dialects affords an exact parallel. For some considerable period after the *κοινὴ διάλεκτος* had been accepted as the literary and the spoken cultivated language of the whole Greek world, we find the dialects

¹ v. Wackernagel, *Altindische Grammatik*, p. xli.

still persisting in local inscriptions. A most instructive example is supplied by an inscription of Larissa,¹ the date of which is about 214 B.C., nearly a century and a quarter after the Macedonian conquest had led to the general adoption of the *κοινή διάλεκτος*. This inscription contains two letters addressed by Philip V, king of Macedon, to the people of Larissa, and their replies. The king's letters are in the *κοινή*, while the replies of the good people of Larissa are in their own Thessalian dialect. The *κοινή διάλεκτος* existed side by side with the local dialects, Arcadian, Bœotian, and the rest, in precisely the same manner as Classical Sanskrit existed side by side with Māgadhī, Māhārāṣṭrī, and the other Prakrits.

We have seen that inscriptions are essentially popular, that their very purpose is to appeal to everyone, learned and unlearned alike, and that they are, therefore, very retentive of popular dialects. But it is characteristic of an established literary language to encroach on the domain of the dialects. The weak give way before the strong, and the use of dialects gradually declines until it disappears.

In our own country, literary English, the language used by educated people, has almost driven the dialects out of the field. They still continue to exist in the mouths of old-fashioned country people, but the spread of education and the facilitation of the means of communication are rapidly destroying them altogether. For literary purposes they have practically ceased, but there was a time when some of them had very real literatures of their own. The would-be dialects which some of our poets and romancers of the present day affect are, of course, in most cases, simply English re-translated, and, as often as not, wrongly re-translated! They find their parallel in the purely artificial Æolic or Doric of Theocritus, and the purely artificial Prakrit of many Indian poems and dramas.

In India, just as in Greece and in England, we may clearly trace this encroachment of the accepted literary

¹ Collitz, *Sammlung d. griechischen Dialekt-Inschriften*, i, p. 133 f.

language on the dialects. The gradual growth of Sanskrit and the gradual decline of the Prakrits are most convincingly proved by the testimony of the inscriptions, which possess this great advantage over most literary works in India, that they can be dated, as a rule, with a fair degree of precision.

Professor Franke has most carefully collected the linguistic facts of the inscriptions in his book *Pāli and Sanskrit*.¹ The results which he obtains from a minute examination of all the extant inscriptions and coin-legends may be summarised as follows:—(1) The language of all the earliest inscriptions (third century B.C.) is Prakrit. Such traces of 'Sanskritisms' as they show are very slight, except in the case of the Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions of the north-western regions.² (2) In the second century B.C. these 'Sanskritisms' are more frequent, but the language of the inscriptions remains substantially Prakrit; (3) in the first century B.C.³ appears the first inscription in a language which may be called Sanskrit, but which is by no means free from traces of Prakrit; in this century, too, the number of 'Sanskritisms' has increased; (4) even in the first century A.D. Prakrit still continues to be the predominant language of the inscriptions; (5) to the second century A.D. belongs the great Sanskrit inscription of Rudradāman and other Sanskrit inscriptions, which not only exhibit the language in its fully elaborated form, but also show a considerable development of the rhetorical style which we are accustomed to associate with the later *kāvya* literature; (6) in the third century A.D. Sanskrit and Prakrit divide the honours; (7) Prakrit is rare in the fourth century, and after the fifth century it disappears altogether from the inscriptions of Northern India.

These facts surely point as plainly as possible to one and only one conclusion. Indian inscriptions, like Greek inscriptions, were originally in the dialect of their locality;

¹ pp. 55 ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 58.

but from the very first they show traces of the influence of the predominant literary language, and especially in that part of India in which, as we have seen, there is reason to believe that this literary language had its origin. The results of this influence become more and more apparent with each century, until nearly every trace of the popular dialects is lost.

The influence thus clearly seen is surely most naturally explained, as in the other cases to which reference has been made, by the constant and increasingly intimate contact of the language of the cultured classes with the popular dialects. We have seen that the literary Sanskrit was certainly a spoken language in the latter half of the second century before the Christian era; and everything seems to indicate that it remained a spoken language for many centuries, gradually extending its domain as time went on. The Epics and the Purāṇas, in their older form, must have been widely known throughout this period; and there is no reason for supposing that the Buddhists of the Mahāyāna departed from the usual Buddhist custom of promulgating their doctrines in the popular language. If they did follow their usual custom, such works as the *Buddha-carita* are good evidence that Sanskrit was a living language in the first or second century A.D.; and it must be borne in mind that the *Buddha-carita* is no isolated phenomenon in the history of the Sanskrit epic. It originates no style of its own, but takes its place, as regards both language and style, quite naturally between the early epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, and the epics of the Classical period. If, therefore, it can be quoted, as Professor Rhys Davids admits,¹ as evidence of the use of a popular Sanskrit at the date of its composition, this use must certainly be held to have obtained for some centuries previously. The *Buddha-carita*, in fact, supplies an important link in the literary evidence.

The literary language, once firmly established, tended in

¹ *Buddhist India*, p. 316.

India, as in Greece and in our own country and, indeed, wherever we are able to trace the growth of a literary language, to force itself on the dialects until, eventually, it completely overpowered them. We have seen how faithfully this gradually increasing influence is shown in the inscriptions and coin-legends. It is most curious that the evidence of inscriptions and coin-legends should have been quoted over and over again by scholars to prove that there was no spoken Sanskrit at the period during which inscriptions and coin-legends are in some form of Prakrit. A more striking instance can scarcely be found of the fact that, in any investigation whatever, a partial examination of the evidence is apt to lead to an absolutely wrong conclusion. When we survey the linguistic history of ancient India as a whole, we shall see that the dialects, as represented in inscriptions or in literature, instead of pursuing their own line of development and gaining greater strength and greater individuality as time went on, came, at a very early period, under the thralldom of Sanskrit—the cultivated speech of the Brahmans first, and then gradually of all the educated classes—until in course of time they lost their own individuality and became merged into Sanskrit. When we turn also from India, and survey as a whole the linguistic history of other countries—of ancient Greece, or of our own country, for instance—we shall find a precisely similar relation existing between the dialects and the chief literary language which arises from among them.

The choice of the particular dialect which is thus to be raised to a commanding position as a great national language is determined by the circumstances which lead to the predominance, politically or religiously, of some particular district. The dialect from which Sanskrit was elaborated is to be sought for in the north-west of India, the home of Brahmanism, and it is difficult indeed to see why we are not to recognise in the language of the Vedas, in the language of works belonging to the Brāhmaṇa and Sūtra periods, and in Classical Sanskrit, different stages, and perfectly natural stages, in the growth and development

of this dialect. The language in all these different stages is organically the same; and, from the point of view of its inflexions and its formative elements, Classical Sanskrit differs from Vedic Sanskrit almost only in so far as the wide choice of alternative forms has been restricted.¹

The extension of the use of Sanskrit was due to the growth of Brahmanism. No one supposes that this increasing power was unopposed; but there can be no doubt that, at a very early period, Brahmanism had made its power felt over practically the whole of the region between the Himālaya and the Vindhya Mountains. There seems, therefore, no need to suppose, with Professor Franke, to whose admirably clear statement of the linguistic facts we owe so much, that Sanskrit was practically a foreign language, which, formed in Kashmir, gradually intruded itself into India, until at last it predominated over the native languages. Some very strong political or religious impulse would be needed to explain such a phenomenon, and no such impulse can be discovered.

Professor Rhys Davids, in his most interesting and original account of *Buddhist India*, goes much farther than Professor Franke. He looks upon Sanskrit as an artificial language, the product of the priestly schools, both in the Brāhmaṇa or later Vedic period, and in the period of Classical Sanskrit. He supposes the use of the dialects, for literary as well as for inscriptional purposes, to be older than the use of Sanskrit;² and he even goes so far as to lay down the general law that, "in the period we are considering, the more closely a book or an inscription approximates to pure Sanskrit, unalloyed by colloquialisms, by Pāli phrases and grammatical forms, the *later* it is— notwithstanding the fact that Sanskrit is, etymologically speaking, older than Pāli."³

This is true only in the sense that, as we have seen above (p. 449), the Prakrits of the inscriptions and coin-legends

¹ Wackernagel, *Altind. Gram.*, p. xxiii.

² p. 137.

³ p. 128.

show throughout this period the increasing influence of the established literary language. Such a rule would land us in strange contradictions if it were applied to determine the relative dates of early Sanskrit¹ and Pali books generally. Nor can it be applied to determine the relative dates of inscriptions. A mere glance will show, for instance, that the language of Aśoka's Shāhbāzgarhi Inscription, in the Yusufzai country, is very much nearer to Sanskrit than that of his Jaugada Inscription in Orissa. We know that these documents are contemporary. According to the canon laid down by Professor Rhys Davids, they ought to be separated by a considerable interval. With regard to the two examples chosen by Professor Rhys Davids himself, the Kharoṣṭhī MS. of the Dhammapada and the Bower MS., it is certainly not "precisely because" the former is in Prakrit that it is earlier than the latter, which is in Sanskrit. The Kharoṣṭhī documents discovered by Dr. Stein at Niya are, if one may judge from the alphabet, of about the same age as the Kharoṣṭhī MS. of the Dhammapada, and these show a great variety of language, varying from correct Sanskrit to a Prakrit very far removed.

The fact is that such a chronological test as Professor Rhys Davids proposes is altogether fallacious. The question why any document during this period is in Sanskrit or Prakrit probably depends on the subject of which it treats, on the status of the writer, and on the locality from which it comes—only to a smaller extent on its date. There is no reason to suppose that Sanskrit and a multitude of Prakrits were not in use concurrently through many centuries.

The evidence of the inscriptions, therefore, when rightly interpreted, strongly supports the view that Sanskrit was spoken throughout this period. The cultivated literary language could scarcely have influenced the popular dialects in so striking a manner unless it had been constantly brought into actual contact with them in the speech of the time.

¹ Professor Rhys Davids, indeed, seems to ignore the fact that there are many Sanskrit works which certainly belong to this period.

I cannot see how it is possible to come to the opposite conclusion, except by drawing a wrong inference from this particular portion of the evidence, and by leaving out of account the very considerable body of positive evidence for the existence of a spoken Sanskrit, contained in the literature itself. This positive evidence, which has been referred to above (p. 443), has been dealt with in detail by such scholars as Kielhorn and Kern, and is admirably summarised both in the Preface to Wackernagel's *Altindische Grammatik* and in Macdonell's *History of Sanskrit Literature*. This evidence is generally accepted by scholars; and I cannot imagine why Professor Rhys Davids did not either refute it or give some reason why he has not thought fit to take it into consideration.

His explanation of the fact, which of course cannot be denied and which he does not attempt to deny, that Sanskrit did eventually become "the literary *lingua franca* for all India,"¹ seems to me to be most unsatisfactory; and I venture to say that such a process as he supposes to have been followed is absolutely without a parallel in the whole literary history of the world. He assumes that Sanskrit was a dead language at a very early period, and that this dead language gradually killed all the living languages, until, from the end of the fourth century, it was left alone. "Then," he says, "linguistically speaking, death reigned supreme" (p. 138). We may remark, in passing, that it is a strange kind of death which possesses such activity. It is a strange kind of death, too, which could produce the works of a Kālidāsa or a Bhavabhūti, a Daṇḍin or a Bāṇa. But the fact is that Sanskrit was not dead. Languages, like everything else in nature, obey the laws of nature. A dead language—that is to say, a language which is no longer rooted in the life of a people—can no more produce proper fruit than a dead tree replanted in the ground. It may become the language of learned communication, or a purely artificial literary language. The fruit which it

¹ p. 154.

produced when it was alive may be cleverly imitated, but it no longer possesses the power of initiative or growth. Now, can this seriously be said of Sanskrit? It is difficult to see the point of the analogy which Professor Rhys Davids attempts to draw between the use of Latin in England in the Middle Ages and the use of Sanskrit in India. There was never a period in English history in which the influence of Latin affected the *form*—apart from the vocabulary—either of the literary language or of the spoken language of England. The use of Latin was confined to courts, colleges, and monasteries; and Latin was even there treated as a dead language. There was never at any time even a remote possibility of its adoption as either the literary or the spoken language of England. If the use of Latin in this country proves one thing more certainly than another, it is precisely this very point on which I am insisting—that a dead language, even under the most favourable circumstances, even under the fostering care of learning and religion, can never take root again and produce a real literature.

The evidence of the Indian drama, which is, however, brushed aside by Professor Rhys Davids,¹ shows that the provincial uneducated people contrived to use their own Prakrits, after all cultured people had adopted the literary language. An educated Hindu, whether prince or charioteer, was obliged, for purposes of communication, to understand these provincial dialects. He spoke to a fisherman in Sanskrit. The fisherman perfectly understood him, but replied in his own dialect, and was perfectly understood in turn. The case of an educated Yorkshire squire in the early part of last century was somewhat similar. There can be little doubt that the Sanskrit which the dramatist put into the mouth of the prince was more correct than the Sanskrit which he would have spoken naturally, or that the Prakrits which he put into the mouths of the subordinate characters were rather the sort of made-up dialects, which

¹ p. 148.

we often hear on our own stage, than the very language of the people. But that this confusion of tongues does more or less accurately represent an actual state of things, it seems unreasonable to doubt. There is not the slightest reason to suppose that the Sanskrit dramas were either acted by actors who did not understand what they were saying, or before audiences who did not understand what was said.¹

To the question "In what degree was Sanskrit a spoken language?" I think we may, then, reply as follows. Sanskrit was a spoken language in precisely the same sense as the literary English which we all speak. It represents the North-Western dialect, the development of which may be traced throughout the literature, and the phonetic characteristics of which are to a great extent preserved in the popular inscriptions of that region. It was, originally, the language of Brahmanism, which came from the same region. Its extension was due to the extension of Brahmanism, and its progress was held in check for a period by the growth of the other great Indian religions, Jainism and Buddhism. With the decline of these in India, its progress was unimpeded, and it spread over the whole of the continent. At first the dialect of a district, then the language of a caste and a religion, it ultimately became the language of religion, politics, and culture throughout India. It became a great national language, and ceased to be so only when Hindu nationality was destroyed by the Muhammadan conquests.

¹ The Sanskrit drama, however, belongs to a period, beginning probably about 400 A.D., for which the existence of Sanskrit as a cultivated spoken language is scarcely disputed. Professor Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, p. 164, admits that Sanskrit "from the fourth and fifth centuries onwards became the literary *lingua franca* for all India."