

Competitive Exams: Introduction to Prakrit

Chronologically pali is the first Sanskrit language and various Prakrits appeared later. Even the meaning of the word 'Pali' underwent changes. In the final stages the word "Pali" meant language of the texts of Theravada Buddhism. The Tripitaka meaning three baskets are books which consist of the canons of the Theravada sect. One part of it deals with the monastic discipline. The second part lays down principles of Buddhism. And the last part deals with various subjects like ethics psychology theories of knowledge and metaphysical problems.

Besides the canonical literature, there was also non-canonical literature in pali. In pali liberature the earlieat works relate to the Jataka stories. The early poetry consisted of a few verses from the songs of the older monks and Nuns, a collection of poems ascribed wrongly to the great disciples of the Buddha in the early days of the order. The style of these is simpler then Sanskrit literature and suggests influence of popular song. The book milinda panda is the most important one. Its subject matter is the dialogue between Milinda and monk Nagasena over some problems of the Buddhist faith. This particular kind of canonical literature in pali was practised in Ceylon also. The classical works Depavamsa and Mahavamsa, the two great chronicles of Ceylon and also some grammatical metrical and lexicographical texts were written in pali.

Now for the word "Prakrit" It stands for all the middle Indo-Aryan speeches which belong to an era between Sanskrit on the one hand and Aryan languages it has sectarian value since it was exclusively used as the speech of the Hinayana Buddhism.

From the earliest times to the first century A. D. Inscriptions were composed exclusively in Prakrit. Asoka left behind 30 inscriptions in Prakrit. Even in literature prakrit came to be used particularly in plays. And prakrit itself consists of different dialects. There were several other prakrits of lesser importance. By the time of the Guptas the prakrits were standardized and had lost their local character. The vernaculars had already developed beyond them. What panini did for Sanskrit others did dor the Prakrits and they began to resemble more the languages actually were based on the conventions of dramatic theory and they never represented popular life. Now did they reflect in any way the linguistic conditions of society. Some plays are composed exclusively in Prakrit and they are technically called sttakas. The Karpuramanjari (about 900 A. D.) Rajasekhara depicting love between man and woman is the most important work of this type.

Continuting the secular aspect of Prakrit language a number of stanzas were written both on love and maxims. The most remarkable amongst such texts is the Gatha Saptasati of Hala one of the Satavahana rulers. This book consists of 700 stanzas about love depicting the varied phases of South Indian rural life. The king probably ruled in the Ist century A. D.

The poems are notable for their conciseness and for their great economy of words and masterly use of suggestions. Some poems contain simple and natural descriptions and references to the lives of peasants and the lower class. More important is the fact that narrative literature and epic poems are fairly extensive in Prakrit. The most noteworthy among them are the Brihatkatha of Gunadhya composed in Paisachi dialect and Setubandha of Pravarasena.

Apart from secular literature prakrit was used for religious literature also like the Jaina canonical works. It was during the 5th century A. D. That most of the Jaina canons were written down. In prakrit literature the Jaina writings have very little literary the poetry of the Jainas is better than prose. Its poetry is written in lively vernacular style.

Furthermore it is to be stated here that scholars treated Apabhramas as a kind of Prakrit. It boasts of extensive literature particularly narrative stories. The first writer to make use of it was Asvaghosa. The others who followed the example were Bhasa (3rd century A. D.) and later Visakhadatta and Kalidasa.

In the Apabhramsa the meter doha was adopted as powerful form of expression of religious and philosophical thoughts. Both Jaina monks and contemporary writers of Tantrik Bhuddhism utilized this meter. Incidentally stray poems dealing with morals maxims ethics religious discourses and legenos were commonly written in Apabhramsa. Among the Jains the columnous texts on the life and activities of Jaina heroes were written in Apabhramsa. It may be noted here in the end that Apabhramsa, Sanskrit and Prakrit had a great influence both on Gujarati and Hindi as late as the 16th century.

Futhermore Prakrit is of linguistic importance since it is illustrative of the linguistic evolution from Prakrit to Apabhramsa and finally to a new regional language. Apabhramsa meaning falling down was a corrupt form of Prakrit dialect. It is believed to have originated in the north-west and traveled from that region along with the migrant people who scattered and settled in central and western India after the Huna invasions. The Prakrit as used by Jains was greatly influenced by Apabhramsa. It is here that the link between the older and the new languages of Maharashtra and Gujarati is evident.