



Bridging the Linguistic Gap: How Classical Language Status of Pali and Prakrit Can Reintroduce Buddhism to Indian Society

Prabhat

PhD scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies,
University of Delhi
prabhat.singh030@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Originating from India, Buddhism has profoundly touched the sensibilities and lives of people worldwide. Yet this religion has lost the ground over time in the country of origin itself. This paper hypothesizes the revival of Pali and Prakrit-the mother tongues of Buddhism in Indian society-can be a tool for the rejuvenation of Buddhism's practices and theories. Restoration of these languages now can bridge the linguistic gap that has historically kept so many Indians distanced from their Buddhist roots by fostering a deeper understanding of the original Buddhist texts and a developing sense of cultural heritage. Discussion of historical context why Buddhism declined in India, the complicated role played by language in issues of cultural identity, the ways in which elevating Pali and Prakrit to classical language status can have promising outcomes, and what steps practically lead up to it. It would address the likely challenges and counterarguments in its conclusion while arguing for a multi-layered approach that integrates language revitalization with educational initiatives, cultural programs, and interfaith dialogue.

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INTRODUCTION

Born of the dawn of ancient India from the teachings of the great Siddhartha Gautama, Buddhism's legacy is great in impact on spirituality and philosophy around the world. On compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness, a synthesis brings cross-cultural understanding across boundaries and continents. However, the narrative of Buddhism in India is a very complex tapestry woven with threads of both thriving and decline. From its early life and great influence, its presence in its birthplace gradually diminished over centuries to a point where Buddhism is now a minority religion in the land of its origin.

But there were several mutually interacting reasons leading to that decline. And the rise of Hinduism as a potent religious force is an essential ingredient in understanding this religious history. Other movements, with socio-political conditions prevailing at the time, changed and molded Buddhism in India, but sometimes, fails to take into account a vital ingredient, one which is simply ignored - the creeping change in language over centuries. The original texts were in Pali and Prakrit but with the influence of Sanskrit, it began to gain disrepute until eventually it became the language of learning and religious expression. Hence, this gradual drift formed, without anyone's knowledge, a gap between the message and the Indian masses as a whole, such that what was attained was less than a profound understanding and appreciation of the real soul of Buddhism.

It foretells that revival to formal status as classical languages of Pali and Prakrit would serve as an extremely strong catalyst for reviving Buddhism consciousness in India, thereby bridging the time-gap which has emerged, thus once again building respect and admiration for the rich heritage of Buddhist thought and practice. This renewal can therefore be said to be a more informed one towards the diversity that exists in Indian culture and religion and foster a sense of inclusiveness when there is greater appreciation for the intricate connections between various traditions. Language is much more than something meant for communication. It is intrinsically interlinked with cultural identity, historical memory, and religious expression. It still remains one of the major tools for transferring knowledge, values, and beliefs from one generation to the other; it influences considerably the very fabric of a given culture. This inter-play between language and culture appears to be much more multi-dimensional and complex, with one affecting the other in multifaceted ways. Through the eyes of religion, language has played a very important role in keeping sacred texts and rituals alive and transferring the same to the next generations. Religious texts that are made sacred and authoritative are written in particular languages. Such languages connect people to their past, establishing them in the beginnings, thereby changing belief systems. They provide backgrounds in the activities of religion, morality, and ideology



concerning the spiritual. When a language associated with a given religion enters into decline or otherwise is pushed to the margins, this contribution may be said to weaken the religious tradition itself, since the tie to its roots and foundational texts is weakened. So it is in India with the decline of Pali and Prakrit. With these languages falling into the background, access to the original texts of Buddhism decreased and, correspondingly, the majority of the nation's meaning and practice of Buddhism tended to dilute. The rise of Sanskrit to the top rank as the major source for religious texts again created some amount of distance between Indians and their Buddhist tradition. Such indirect linguistic drift was contributing towards an alienation from the authentic Buddhist thoughts and the time-forward evolution of the culture of India.

PALI AND PRAKRIT: LANGUAGES OF EARLY BUDDHISM

The Pali and Prakrit language is a part of the early Buddhist texts. They are of the greatest importance in clearing up the historical development and key doctrines of Buddhism. They let us into the linguistic and cultural world into which Buddhism came forth and flourished.

PALI:

Pali is the sister-language of Prakrit, though it has become the most popular and widespread language of Theravada Buddhism. The Theravada text is basically Pali composed, and this text, known as Tipitaka (Three Baskets), carries with it the teachings of the Buddha, monastic rules, philosophical discourses, and in general, a reservoir of knowledge that explains the very meaning of Buddhist ideas and practices. And thus, Pali would be considered a vital link with the essence of teaching of Theravada Buddhism, which provides a straight way to the original Buddha's message.

PRAKRIT:

Prakrit was a set of Middle Indo-Aryan languages that were a vernacular in much of ancient India during the time of Buddha. Actually, most of the early Buddhist texts, with those included in the Jain and Buddhist canons, are written in several Prakrit dialects. In fact, such texts are very informative about the social, cultural, and linguistic context within which Buddhism arose. Through Prakrit, one gets a feel of the given languages and cultural fine-tuning which were part of everyday conversations. This definitely adds to the social and historical background against which early Buddhism evolved.

**Importance of original texts:**

original Pali and Prakrit texts are assets to be known for the purest form of the Buddha's words. Now, translated to help in making translations in spreading the gospel of Buddhism far more vast in reach. However, translations tend to miss out on nuances and subtleties so laden with the original language. Since translation can often water down the depth and richness of the texts, this opens up doors for an even more nuanced and authentic interpretation of Buddhist principles. Making these original texts available enhances comprehension of the Buddha's message and authenticates informed practice in Buddhism.

THE CASE FOR CLASSICAL LANGUAGE STATUS FOR PALI AND PRAKRIT

In respect of their historical and cultural importance coupled with the role both have played in preserving early Buddhist teachings at its core, this paper submits that Pali and Prakrit must be granted a classical language status in India. This status would involve promoting the study and research so as to ensure they are integrated into the school system. Proper recognition of their importance in the cultural and history arena is due. Not only would it help to establish their role in history, but a means for them to be relevant in the modern world would also be opened.

1. Resusitating Cultural Heritage

For the immediate future, the promotion of Pali and Prakrit as classical languages would revive a particularly vital element in the cultural heritage of India. In doing so, we shall be able to embed an even greater sense of pride and identity among Indians-about ethnic Hindu and Buddhist communities-in Indian culture. Moreover, this recognition would also make the cultural tapestry of India somewhat more integrated by accepting the great importance that Buddhism has lent in the formation of the country's history and heritage.

2. Interfaith Understanding, and Interfaith Dialogue

Granting classical language status to Pali and Prakrit can make interfaith dialogue easier and bring an increased understanding between them. Good study of these languages creates a sense of historical and cultural pride that is not only mutually shared but also interdisciplinary across Buddhism and other religious practice traditions in India. It can work as such that greater respect and mutual understanding can be created, thus forming a more harmonious society. This would also assist in the construction of a



shared heritage and contribute towards a greater respectful and nuanced environment for interfaith activities.

3. Enhancing Scholarly Research and Academic Scholarship

Study of Pali and Prakrit is pertinent to improving scholarly research and scholarship in Buddhist studies. This would increase investment in research and translation projects and educational programs related to Buddhist texts and philosophy by recognizing these languages as classical languages. This, in turn, might enhance greater understanding about the historically notable development of Buddhism, its philosophical contributions, and its contemporary relevance. It can further contribute to a better scholarly understanding of Buddhism's intellectual and philosophical contributions through this renewed emphasis on research and scholarship.

4. Revival of Buddhist Practices

Pali and Prakrit revival can also lead to the revival of Buddhist practices in India. Moving forward toward better access to the original texts of Buddhism, it can make way for more real practice, informed Buddhism in its own tradition's wider perspectives, and most prominently, enable people to come back to the real values which such a basic text impresses upon anyone, including compassion, mindfulness, and non-violence in the building of an ethical and peaceful society. This revival of Buddhist practices can eventually lead the world to be more compassionate and ethical, with values that suit modern life.

CONCRETE STEPS TOWARDS CLASSICAL LANGUAGE STATUS

Achieving classical language status for Pali and Prakrit can be achieved only with an integrated approach which includes educational reforms in addition to cultural initiatives. For this purpose, the support of the government is essentially required to include all these languages in the curriculum and to assist their study and implementation.

1. Inclusion of Pali and Prakrit in Formal Education/Academic Curriculum

These languages should be taught optionally in schools and universities. Besides textbooks and teacher training programs, besides online resources, these languages could find a place in students' curriculum; that would enable them better understand the thought and practice of Buddhism, further cherishing their



cultural heritage. It would help them approach history, philosophy, and spirituality differently while studying under that umbrella.

2. Centres of Pali and Prakrit

Centers for country-wise research and scholarship for teaching Pali and Prakrit across the country shall be established in general. Conferences, workshops, and seminars may be conducted. A vibrant community of scholars and enthusiasts shall be constituted to discover and preserve these languages. Such centers shall serve as the repository of research, collaboration, and dissemination of knowledge relating to Pali and Prakrit.

3. Translation and printing of Pali and Prakrit texts,

It is mainly the need to make Pali and Prakrit texts more accessible to a greater audience. This can be done by undertaking a translation project, through publication initiatives, and online sources. Reading texts in more than one language may bridge the gap in language, thereby achieving a wider understanding of the teachings of Buddhism. This gap between the original texts and the general public will be bridged by accessibility, and then, therefore, a general understanding of the teaching of Buddhism opens.

4. Hosting Cultural Activities and Celebrations

There can be cultural activities and festivals celebrated in Pali and Prakrit that would possibly promote better awareness and interest in the language. Some of these cultural activities might include recitation of Buddhist Scriptures, plays, and seminars about Buddhist philosophy and meditation that may make the culture more colorful and better understandings of the culture value of Pali and Prakrit may be gained.

5. Government Support and Recognition:

It is also highly dependent on the aid and acceptance of the government to attain this status. This could be easily done through funding for research and education as well as cultural events common among the people. Public awareness campaigns and policy support by the government can play a great role in promoting the study and usage of the languages. Therefore, the implementation of all policies related to Pali and Prakrit would be greatly facilitated with the help and acceptance of the government.

CHALLENGES AND COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Although there is potential impact in giving classical language status to Pali and Prakrit, there are also some of the potential challenges and counterarguments which need to be addressed. Challenges such as these have to be looked at closely, and the planning must adopt a strategic view toward successful implementation of the initiatives proposed.

Resource Constraints:

The proposed initiatives are capital-heavy in terms of monetary as well as human resources. Material for education development requires substantial expense. Training for teaching professionals, research centers setup necessitate high costs. Other resource-related issues are put aside from reaching these on the back of which advance planning and strategic alliances between government departments, educational institutions, and not-for-profits become crucial to mobilize much-needed resources.

Crossing over the financial and logistics barrier requires some amount of collaboration and resource mobilization.

Existing Language Communities' Apposition

Pali and Prakrit would be opposed in the education sector by communities whose linguistic inclinations were towards other languages primarily as a result of the focus put on Sanskrit. This opposition shall only be met with dialogued responses as well as consultation with the stakeholders on one hand and concentration on how different the two could complement each other with regards to their unique enriching inputs to the learning fields. Open communication and collaboration may bridge the gap of fears and develop consensus within various language communities.

Debunking Misconceptions about Conflicts of Religious Interest:

This, however, can be replied to with the fact that by giving classical status to Pali and Prakrit, Buddhism will be given precedence in religious traditions over other religions. To all these criticisms, one will, however, have to draw attention to its role in a greater cultural and historical context as well as its potential contribution to interfaith dialogue and understanding. Emphasis on cultural and historical importance will eradicate doubts which say that the language is biased towards religious tradition.



Snags in Learning and Application:

Pali and Prakrit are not in common use today, and for some, it could be even tough to learn those languages. The way out in this case is the designing good methods of teaching and available resources that ensure these languages may be learned without too much hassle. Positive and interesting teaching methods will facilitate the process of application.

CONCLUSION: A PATH FORWARD

The denouement of Buddhism in India is far too complex a phenomenon to be attributed to any single cause or factor. In fact, my argument for this paper is that the linguistic vacuum created by the decline of Pali and Prakrit was one of the more important factors that estranged many Indians from their Buddhist heritage. This can bridge this gap and renew interest in the very rich heritage of Buddhist thought and practice. Restoring these languages to a formal status as classical languages can bridge this gap and renew an interest in the very rich heritage of Buddhist thought and practice.

This would not be awarding classical language status to Pali and Prakrit alone; it would be reviving a very important part of India's cultural identity, certainly for the fostering of better interfaith dialogue, and most importantly, for a closer understanding of Buddhism. With this objective, the following steps could be taken: Incorporate Pali and Prakrit into the syllabus, Establish centers which focus on the study of Pali and Prakrit, Encourage translations as well as distribution of books on Pali and Prakrit and culture events can be held to create awareness among the masses. Moreover, government aid can be solicited for such purposes.

It would be a strong need for a multidimensional approach with language revitalization, educational initiatives, cultural programs, and interfaith dialogue. Only then can we imagine the time in which Buddhism will again flourish in its birthplace, filling India with more compassion, mindfulness, and peace. This will be in the context of a more inclusive and harmonious society, when the people within will dig deeper into understanding and appreciating their rich culture and religious heritage.



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