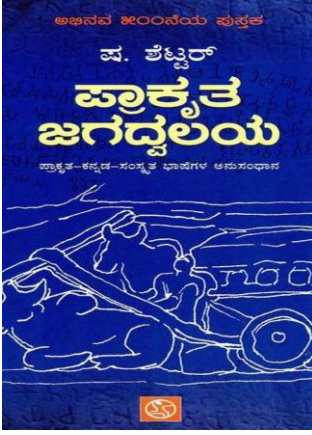


The PRAKRIT universe

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S. Settar's many-faceted book, *Prakruta Jagadvalaya*, contributes to our 'cultural self-apprehension' by emphasising and documenting the pivotal role played by Prakrit, as a unifying written language across regions before Sanskrit assumed that role

Professor S. Settar's new book *Prakruta Jagadvalaya* is more than an important addition to repertoire of thought-provoking books on Kannada language and culture. Its value can best be indicated through a phrase recurrent in Wole Soyinka's writings on culture: cultural self-apprehension. In a situation where colonialism as a habit of thought survives the end of political colonialism, it is important for us to look before and after at our own past and present without putting on the blinkers of colonialism. But it is never an easy job. All of us are victims to the double bind of colonialist worldview which surreptitiously creeps into the crevices of our souls and takes over our thoughts and feelings. Soyinka's recipe for this situation is cultural self-apprehension, which is a call to look at our own selves and cultures whose values and priorities need not replicate those of borrowed thought-constructs.

Though Settar had produced a voluminous body of writings on aspects of Indian history in English, he started writing in Kannada only in the last decade. It was a major shift. His first Kannada book -- Sangam Tamilagam Mattu Kannada Nadu-Nudi -- about the relationship between ancient Tamil and Kannada cultures, altered the ways we look at our past. He created for himself a framework from the perspective of Western scholarship on India: he could look at two major south Indian literary cultures free from the binaries like Sanskrit versus the regional languages or Dravidian versus Sanskrit. For, this was the first time it gave us, Kannada readers, a scholarly glimpse into the riches of ancient Tamil heritage. It also contested, without overtly stating it, the South Asian scholar Sheldon Pollock's by then famous work, *South Asian Texts in History*. This brilliant account of the gradual replacement of classical Sanskrit by vernacular universals had left out Tamil classicism that dominated.

Settar's next book, 'Halegannada' is a radical retelling of the fascinating story of the evolution of orthography and inscriptions by giving pride of place for the first time to the sociology of actual scribes whose hard labour inscribed letters on stone and copper to disseminate knowledge and information. Thanks to his missionary zeal as a new convert into Buddhism, Asoka resorted to Brahmi script to 'release knowledge from the prisons of the throat of a few', to give knowledge a greater outreach among people at large. This led to rising in eminence of a non-Brahminical community skilled in carving letters on stone. He also tells us how common people like peasants, merchants and soldiers slowly replaced kings and nobles as the protagonists of the stories in stone.

Settar's present book continues his earlier explorations into the evolution of Kannada language through an analysis of shifts in alphabets, styles and languages. It invites us to accompany the author in his journey that lasts for over six centuries from 300 BC to 300 AD.

One of the most crippling ways of understanding our past is the view that our history is a manifestation of conflict between binaries: Aryan-Dravidian, Brahmin-Shudra, Sanskrit-vernacular etc. Such approaches blind us to areas

of exchanges and negotiations, diglossia, bi- and multilingualism. Still worse, it is least helpful in understanding translation, a major site of negotiation, responsible for cultural dynamics of our past.

One of the great advantages of Sheldon Pollock's historiography of South Asian literary cultures is the emphasis on negotiations as opposed to opposition between languages. Settar also employs the Kannada equivalent of this word: *anusandhana*. However, there is an important difference. Pollock's approach, though not binary, is bilateral as it examines the relationship between the classical and vernacular languages. Settar's perspective is trilateral: between Sanskrit, Prakrit and Kannada. *Kavirajamarga*, which according to Pollock, is the great watershed in South Asian literary history. A unique moment of exemplary negotiation and equal exchange between trans-regional Sanskrit and Kannada, a regional language. Settar's narrative compliments this picture by exploring another fascinating exchange and negotiation between Prakrit and Kannada. Thanks to Buddhism and Jainism which spoke in Prakrit, it spread to wherever these great religions went. Asoka's passion for disseminating Dhamma gave fillip to literacy through stones and copper inscriptions. This is another point that distinguishes Settar from Pollock. For Pollock the rise of vernaculars has secular reasons, whereas Settar emphasises the role of Buddhism and Jainism in developing both the trans-regional Prakrit and Sanskrit as well as Kannada. He also gives adequate attention to composite languages characteristic of Indian literary culture. He rightly singles out for praise two ancient Jain authors, Karnataka Shivakotyacharya and Chavundaraya who wrote *Vaddaradhane* and *Trishashtishlakapurusha Purana*. For, they produced a new mixture of Prakrit, Sanskrit and Kannada, pointing the way towards later Jain poets like Pampa, Ranna and Janna, tracing the lineage of three greats of Jain poetry to a time earlier than *Kavirajamarga*.

Another important chapter of the book deals with what could be termed the inbuilt aesthetics of Buddhist sculptors who created a whole applied vocabulary of architecture prior to the emergence of shastras in Pali and

Sanskrit. This is an advance over Ananda Coomaraswamy's essay, 'Indian Architectural Terms' based on Pali texts.

The above is only a very brief account of Settar's dense and many-faceted book that contributes to our cultural self-apprehension by emphasising and documenting the pivotal role played by Prakrit, as a unifying written language across regions before Sanskrit assumed that role.

Book Talk will be a fortnightly column by writer, translator and critic H.S. Shivaprakash.