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# Kannada as a Classical Language

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The declaration of the classical language status to Kannada expectedly received an enthusiastic and celebratory response in Karnataka. However discerning scholars and commentators also expressed apprehension that this categorisation (in fact the very idea of considering a language classical) would add another hierarchical stratum to the already in-built graded hierarchies in the domain of languages. Babasaheb Ambedkar's notion of graded inequality would not be inappropriate for the interrelations among languages in the socio-cultural historical conditions of any time but also exacerbated in the post print technology, bureaucratised regimes of power. There was also the apprehension that it would lead to competitive linguistic politics which draws on chauvinistic attitudes to language.

However, such apprehensions apart, the status of classical language to Kannada can be considered beneficial as:

1. This can motivate a focussed revisiting of the history of the language in question, not in the formal non-historical (trans historical) mode but as that which is fundamentally enmeshed in the religious, political structures of power and also the existing social structures. For example, the elaborate attention given to the hegemony of Sanskrit in case of Kannada has marginalised the fact that for nearly half a millennium, that is from the third century BCE to third century CE, it was the Prakrit cosmopolis which was dominant. This was due to the use of Pali by followers of Buddhism such as the Mauryan emperor Ashoka and later due to the preference given to Prakrit by the dominant Jain religion in Kannada Nadu. The shift to Sanskrit happened towards the fifth century. The complex historical narrative interweaves religion and politics at the regional as well as pan Indian levels.
2. The disruption of the study of old Kannada prioritised in the *Navodaya* (Kannada Renaissance) led to the loss of many of the cognitive and philosophical traditions. The classical status should motivate a new scholarship on the knowledge produced in the pre-modern period in Kannada.

The classical status of Kannada has to be understood in the context of its long history of 2500 years as a spoken language branching out from the family of southern Dravidian languages. The latter itself had emerged from proto-Dravidian or old Dravidian. Exactly when did it acquire an independent identity has been the object of reasoned surmises. However, the consensus is that it happened in the fifth century BCE. Prakrit language had made inroads into

proto-Dravidian before Ashoka introduced the Brahmi script in the stone edicts he ordained. Prof. S Settar in his book *Prakrit Jagadvalaya* (2018) opined that Prakrit along with the Brahmi script nurtured the languages in south India and beyond.

Similarly, it is difficult to determine with precision as to when did Kannada enter the stages of literisation (use of script) and literarisation (becoming a vehicle of literary expression). The famous Halmidi inscription from the fifth century (450 CE to be precise), that is described as the first extant Kannada inscription, certainly suggests that Kannada had developed through the two phases at least a century earlier.

It is pertinent to note that Karnataka is the second most dense region in terms of inscriptions and these evidence the fascinating development of Kannada as a distinctive language with the formation of its own script. Throughout the centuries Kannada co-existed with many languages and its negotiations with Prakrit, Sanskrit, and sister Dravidian languages helped form a linguistic zone marked by extreme linguistic diversity. The historical destiny of Kannada has been to survive and grow in an ambience of mindboggling diversity. Even after two millennia, Karnataka ranks third among the Indian states with the highest density of linguistic diversity. As the People's Survey of Indian Languages evidences almost all language families in India are represented in Karnataka—22 scheduled as well as 72 unscheduled languages co-exist along with other languages.

As such, the case of Kannada as a classical language ought to dispel any erroneous notion of classical as pure, monolithic, static or possessing closed boundaries. A classical language is a product of heterogeneity, hybridity, negotiation and assimilation. In case of Kannada's literary and cultural traditions, this linguistic history has also meant openness, tolerance of diversity, and the rejection of all frames of thought which are inimical to plurality and diversity. The ninth century work *Kavirajamarga* says "Is it not true gold to show full tolerance to the thoughts and beliefs of others?"

Sheldon Pollock in his magnum opus *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (2006) has opined that *Kavirajamarga* might have been "the first text in the world culture to theorise a vernacular poetics." The text describes the many dialects of Kannada (*halavu kannadangalu*) as so many that the mythical serpent *Adishesha* despite having a hundred tongues is unable to count them. The author also identifies the regions where *Kernel Kannada* (that is, the standard dialect) is spoken. The late D R Nagaraj analysed the work as a political tract which describes the Kannada Nadu as extending from Kaveri to Godavari and constructs a standard Kannada dialect as an instrument of the region's vernacular polity. In his scholarly work *Listening to the Loom: Essays on Literature, Politics and Violence* (2012), Nagaraj observed, "The courtly practice of literature was linked to the emergence of the Sanskrit cultural order and to Sanskrit's role in defining the forms of cultural power. The *Kavirajamarga* was a product of an intense negotiation with this order."

K V Subbanna is also of the same view. In his book titled *Kavirajamarga Mattu Kannada Jagattu*, Subbanna notes, "Such a poetics of wisdom which emerged as a historical necessity, necessitates propounding the people friendly politics of *Kavirajamarga*." Pollock also interprets the text as embedded in the historical shift from the Sanskrit cosmopolis to the

vernacular cosmopolis. Therefore, the history of Kannada is inscribed with the politics of the regional versus the pan-Indian, the vernaculars versus the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

It should be immediately stated that Tamil was involved in the same politics but developed very different strategies in its negotiations with Sanskrit. Prof. S Settar's book *Sangam Tamilagam* makes a comparative analysis of this phenomenon and also strongly underlines the significance of the negotiations between Dravidan languages often overshadowed by the exclusive focus on Sanskrit. D N Shankar Bhat has argued from a radical point of view urging the re-construction of the history of Kannada language and its grammar by eschewing consciously the Sanskrit centric frame works.

The evolution of Kannada cannot be understood without reference to the formation of elite groups/classes, constantly shifting political alliances and the politics of religion. S B Joshi has written prolifically on the position of Kannada in the regions of Maharashtra and Kannada Nadu. There is evidence of a long continuous cultural symbiosis between Kannada and Marathi and alternatively between Kannada Nadu and Maharashtra. This is reflected interestingly in the migration of popular *Bhakti* cults such as *Vithoba* of Pandharpur and the *Varkari* tradition. Before the formation of the linguistic states, the boundaries of the two cultures were porous. The extreme hybridity in the border areas is also an inalienable aspect of the two classical languages—Kannada and Marathi. This hybridity is also visible in the various dialects of Kannada. These dialects also occupy a bilingual or trilingual social space. For instance, Urdu in its *dakhani* form has shaped the dialect of Kannada spoken in the Kalyana Karnataka region (comprising Kalburgi and Bidar) and similarly Marathi has been a major influence on the Kannada spoken in the Kittur Karnataka region (prominently comprising Belagavi). I am drawing attention to these familiar features only to support my argument that a classical language in a multi lingual society is essentially and incorrigibly plural. This needs to be emphasised because there is an entrenched notion that Sanskrit, another classical language, is pure, uncontaminated and exclusively a donor language owing no debt to other languages. This of course is untrue.

In his excellent studies of the role of Prakrit and the technical vocabulary of Buddhist architecture, Prof. S Settar has traced the origin of the technical vocabulary majorly from Prakrit. He has also provided detailed analysis of the contribution of the artisans to the Kannada language. Contrary to the notion that the scribes were uneducated and only inscribed the copies of the edict-texts, Prof. Settar's studies show that most of them were educated, held respectable positions and received gifts of land in a manner similar to that of the priests. This is only one among the other instances of Kannada's inclusivity. Renowned poets doubled as composers of the inscriptions in both prose and verse. Some of the scribes were learned enough to compose on their own.

The history of the inscriptions in Karnataka itself is fascinating. The first scribe or sculptor who inscribed the first rock edicts of Ashoka was a person called Chapada from today's Afghanistan and he knew the Kharoshti script. In Karnataka, he inscribed in Brahmi and his first effort in this region is a testimony to the problems of code switching (script switching?). The inscriptions adding up to 20,020 (both stone and metal), are a detailed record of the development of Kannada language and at the same time in the words of D R Nagaraj are "public

narratives.” The switch over to Kannada as the medium of the inscriptions is itself a momentous happening in the history of South Asia. The linguistic shift converged with a major political and religious shift. The inscriptions are also a source for rewriting the history of the hegemony of Sanskrit in a predominantly Dravidian linguistic zone.

Probably the most radical shift in Kannada language and literature occurred with the *Vachanakara* movement of the twelfth century. On the one hand, the major genre of poetry namely *champu* (that is, a verse form combining the prose and verse using the Sanskrit prosodic forms) was replaced by the *vachana* form which literally means a ‘saying’ or that which is spoken. Puranic or epic narratives made way for authentic self-expression of poets who were predominantly from the artisanal castes. The ornate, stylised poetic expression derived from Sanskrit poetry was replaced by spoken Kannada and the texture of the writing was strewn with images, metaphors and living details of everyday life.

The multi volume edition of *vachanas* edited by Prof. M M Kalaburgi includes more than 20,000 *vachanas* by *vachanakaras* who identify themselves with their professions. Cobbler, boatman, washerman, street performer, a woman poet who was formerly a prostitute—it is as though a whole real world entered into the Kannada poetry for the first time. The language of the *vachanas* is closest to the actual speech of the times. The radicalism of the *vachana* seemed to have ended with the violent end of the revolution at Kalyana. Later, the *vachanas* were ‘discovered’ twice in Kannada literary history. Once when from fourteenth century the *vachanas* were embedded into the philosophical narratives known as *Shunya Sampadane*. The second instance was in the early twentieth century by scholars such as P G Halakatti and S S Basavanal. This re-discovery in a way led to the reconstruction of the Kannada literary tradition.

In many ways the modern construction of the Kannada literary tradition owes a great deal to the scholarly work of the missionaries. They introduced printing technology, initiated print journalism, brought out scholarly editions of ancient texts, collected folk literature, compiled dictionaries and grammars of Kannada language, edited primers and created schools for girls and for the under privileged. For reasons of proselytising the medium of instruction was Kannada and translations became a priority. It must be admitted that many of the missionary scholars like some administrators were genuinely dedicated to the Kannada cause (In fact, a famous scholar missionary was called back by his mission for failing to convert a single person!)

Among the missionaries was Rev. Ferdinand Kittel who formulated the periodisation of Kannada literature and wrote a competent introduction. Interestingly, the missionaries also collected folk texts from the oral tradition and compiled Kannada proverbs. Kittel’s dictionary work took him beyond the literary standard dialect of Kannada. With a Kannada assistant he went around to the market streets and shanties to collect the non-formal colloquial words and expressions.

Apart from constructing the literary canon of Kannada literature by bringing ancient text through translations included in the gazetteer, this period also saw teachers contributing information on socio-economic and cultural aspects of their places to be incorporated into

social science texts. This was among the first steps towards making modern Kannada a language of social sciences, a task Kuvempu took up by using the Mysore University *prasaranga*. The Jnanpith recipient author had resolved that knowledge produced in all natural and social sciences should be communicated in Kannada. The dominant literature-centric discourses on Kannada have made us ignore the production of knowledges in Kannada which Kuvempu was passionate about. A classical language is in fact a repository of all knowledges and not just a medium of literature.

This leads us into the challenges confronting Kannada in the contemporary world. Among them is the hegemony of English in the domain of global knowledge—both in production and dissemination. There is no need to elaborate on the distortion caused by orientalism and the Euro-centric monolithic perception of knowledge. Neo-imperialism in its present avatar has re-established the monopoly of the west (should I say USA?) over the validation and dissemination of knowledge. The utilitarian and instrumentalist view of knowledge has transformed languages into carriers of information that is considered to be worth possessing.

In Ganesh Devy's words, languages are no longer independent autonomous cognitive worlds negotiating with other worlds on terms of equality. A perverse kind of knowledge monotheism is driving us towards a unitary, monochronic knowledge universe. In this context, Kannada—a language with a continuous history of over 250 years is no longer a producer of knowledge. At best, it can be a translator and receiver of global knowledge. Pollock had considered *Kavirajamarga* as an example of 'localising the global.' Will Kannada be reduced to merely retailing bits and pieces of global knowledge? This is a matter of serious concern.

K V Narayana has argued that the dominance of English and the preference for English medium education has brought us to a situation where the number of Kannada speakers has been growing but the domains of its use have been shrinking. U R Anantha Murthy had also expressed his apprehension that Kannada may become the language of the backyard with the growing assumption that it is insufficient for intellectual functions/purposes recognised by the globalised world. This is accompanied by the social hierarchisation of the Kannada medium schools for the poor and the under privileged and English medium schools for the cultural and economic elite. With the support of a poor judgement by the constitutional bench of the Supreme Court on Karnataka government's policy on the medium of education and the massive privatisation of education in Karnataka, the neglect of Kannada in education has led to deep divisions in civil society. Increasingly parental preference is for English medium schools.

The decision of the government to introduce English as a subject from the first standard and the recent proposal to start English medium sections in Karnataka public schools has revived the acerbic debate between the Dalit groups and pro-Kannada groups. The Dalit groups see the opposition to English medium learning as a denial of opportunities, social mobility and benefits of globalisation to the Dalit children. Dalit intellectuals in Karnataka have posed serious and complex arguments grounded in the register of constitutional rights and equality. Behind this imbroglio is the near abdication by the 'Indian State' itself of the responsibility of creating an efficient system of education which provides proficiency in both—the first language as well as English. The present system produces a huge number of neo-illiterates. It

is tragic that this should happen in a state with a high density of multilingualism and a two millennia long experience of negotiating with many languages.

The institutions, policies and actions of the modern state invariably tend towards bureaucratisation of languages. This has led to the gradual marginalisation of the less dominant languages. The insistence on script, inclusion in the eighth schedule, non-listing of languages with less than 10,000 speakers, etc has certainly weakened the already wrongly labelled ‘minor and other languages.’ This has created apprehension about the hegemony of Kannada as a threat to the smaller languages. Tribal and nomadic languages are facing imminent death. The classical language status of Kannada has little meaning if its sister languages which have enriched it, disappear.

K V Narayana has pointed out that the paradox of bilingualism involving Kannada and English has gained acceptance but in case of bilingualism involving two indigenous languages the shift is usually towards monolingualism, especially when one of them is not a privileged language. This is also true in case of the many regional dialects of Kannada. The innovative experiments in code mixed texts as resources for language learning and availability of teachers familiar with the local dialect can contribute to the sustenance of the dialects. The standard dialect should not be allowed to usurp the diverse dialects of Kannada. Kannada has to be imagined as ‘many Kannadas’ as the author of *Kavirajamarga* did.

A significant challenge is the appropriate integration of Kannada with digital technology and soon with the Artificial Intelligence. As the present generation has decisively moved away from print to digital medium, unless Kannada texts and knowledge sources are made available in digital mode, the future generations are likely to abandon Kannada. The more serious challenge is for those who are not proficient in English and are already being deprived of access to the knowledge available in English.