

Significance of Pali Language with a focus on its translation procedures into English: A Study

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Abstract:

Pali plays a vital role in the cultural history of India, like Sanskrit literature. Complete canonical early Buddhist literature is available in the Pali language. Pāli remains the factual basis for understanding Buddhism, though later teachers of Mahāyāna Buddhism have adopted Sanskrit for their philosophical and logical expositions. Being the very ancient language of India, Pali has occupied a prominent position in the history of Indian Buddhism. Vedic Chandas was the oldest language in India. Prakrit, Pali, and Sanskrit languages are developed with the similarities of the Chandas. Prakrit and Pali were either simultaneous or immediately grown-up languages. This is due to the similarity between the Chandas. Prakrit and Pali. In the later period, classical Sanskrit evolved from it. There is no doubt that Sanskrit was the tremendous and refined language in ancient India, and it is the source of all modern Indian languages. There are various words in Pali that often get translated into English but appear not to be much helpful. Translations of terms of this ancient language, Pali must help us to understand the real sense used by the Buddha.

Keywords: Pali, Literature, Translation, Prakrit, Tripitaka

Introduction:

If one is interested to know the problems of Pali text translations into English and other foreign languages, he has to know about the profundity of the Pali language and its grammatical structure initially. But it is possible only when one studies the Pali language. Unfortunately, most Indians have forgotten the Pali, an ancient Indian language. Among the most ancient languages of this Āryāvarta, Pali is one. Not only that, Pali is one of the wealthiest and most beautiful languages of ancient India. It has many sermons and sacred texts, besides interesting non-canonical literature. But unfortunately, Indians have stopped learning and even thinking about this language. Yet, this language is essential for understanding the Buddhist culture and Indian history. Its study will help understand ancient India's religious-philosophical issues and incidents.

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Canonical literature in Pali:

Pali has a large number of canonical works. They are the base of the Buddhist religion and all kinds of Buddhist studies. Pali canonical literature is called 'Pali Tipiṭaka,' which means the three baskets. They are 1. Sutta Piṭaka, 2. Vinaya Piṭka, 3. Abhidhamma Piṭaka. Among them, the 'Suttapiṭaka' has five nikāyas. Similarly, each piṭaka contains many Pali texts.

Tipiṭaka is the name given to the Buddhist Holy Scriptures. This word is made up of two words; *ti* meaning 'three' and *piṭaka* meaning 'basket.' The word basket was given to this literature because it had orally transmitted for many centuries, like basket of bamboo cane, which contains the material like bricks at a construction site transfers from the head of one worker to another head of another worker. The three parts of the Tipiṭaka are,

1. **Sutta piṭaka**
2. **Vinaya piṭaka**
3. **Abhidhamma piṭaka**

The 'Tipiṭaka' was composed in ancient Māgadhī language, later known as Pali, and takes up more than 40 volumes in its English translation. It is the most important sacred literature of any excellent world religion. We have non-canonical literature in Pali, which contains several interesting books. Some of the poems and other texts are unique in this portion.

Ancient status of Pali language:

Vedic Chandas was the oldest language in India. Prakrit, Pali, and Sanskrit languages are developed with the similarities of the Chandas. Prakrit and Pali were either simultaneous or immediately grown-up languages. This is due to the similarity between the Chandas. Prakrit and Pali. In the later period, classical Sanskrit evolved from it. There is no doubt that Sanskrit was the tremendous and refined language in ancient India, and it is the source of all modern Indian languages. It was also used for scientific literature and ancient India. Yet we should consider Pali, whose sisterly language shares the source-ship to its children of Indian languages. Between the Chandas and its modern derivatives such as Hindi and other modern Indian languages lay a group of languages known as the 'Prakrits' or Middle Indo-Aryan languages, which were the vernacular dialects of ancient Indians. As these Prakrit languages are closely related to Chandas and classical Sanskrit, they are usually studied together. Several of these Middle Indo-Aryan languages became important literary vehicles; the best-known language among them is Pali, which still serves as the ancient language of India and the canonical language of Buddhist studies in Asia. Other Prakrit languages such as Śaurasenī, Mahārāṣṭri, Māgadhī, and Gāndhārī embody the various facets of the literature of both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Pali, which belongs to the middle Indo Aryan period, is India's important language. 'Māgadhī' was the original name of Pali as it was spoken language in the land of Magadhā during the 6th century B. C., the period in which Buddha lived. The antique Pali Literature reveals India's philosophical, social and religious condition most authentically. In the history of Indo Āryan languages, Prākṛit languages played a predominant role, and Pāli, one of these languages, according to an argument, belongs to the middle Indo Aryan period of Prakrits. This period is again divided into three parts:

1. Old Prakrit period
2. Middle Prakrit period
3. Late Prakrit period or Apabhramśa period.

Thus, we must understand that Pali is one of India's ancient languages. It was a kind of Prākṛit as it is believed that the Prakrit was a collective name of several dialects of ancient India. Pali is respected in the entire world and Theravada countries in particular¹. Though Pali is not a grammar-oriented language like Sanskrit, it is good to know its grammar if one wants to learn it systematically. The grammar of Pali is not complex like that of the Sanskrit language because, basically, it was one of the spoken languages of ancient India, and spoken language is always simple. It cannot remain within the boundaries of grammar. Due to assimilation and other simplification methods, Pali became a simple language. Pali is also a highly fluctuating language, in which almost every word has modified the meaning of its root.

Prakrits in ancient India and the Place of Pali in them:

The word *Prākṛit* is derived initially from *Prakṛiti*. But there has been a most arduous debate over this issue. The widely accepted etymology of *Prākṛit* is that "taken birth from *Prākṛiti*, i.e., *Sanskrit*. Thus the *Prākṛit* is originated from *Sanskrit*. But the other opinion reverses the position. It says that the *Prākṛiti* in *Prākṛit* means the *swabhāva* or nature. Thus they say that the *Prākṛit* is that which comes from nature. (*prakṛityā swabhāvena siddham prākṛitam or prakṛitnām sādharmaṇa-janānāmidam Prākṛitam*)

It is challenging to understand the formula that led to the use of this term. However, ancient grammarians who wrote Prākṛit grammars have explained the word *Prākṛit* as derived from *Prakṛiti* or *Sanskrit*. They say *Prakṛiti*, i.e., *Sanskrit*, is the source, and the language that appeared from it is called *Prākṛit*. If this *Sanskrit*, the source of *Prākṛits*, includes the *Sanskrit* and all dialects that period, and it is the Chandas, then there is no problem as all will

¹ Pāli Sāhitya kā Itihās, p. no. 599-635

agree with this opinion. *Prākṛit* was widely spoken in ancient India. According to *Bharata*, the author of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there were seven kinds of *Prākṛits* in that period.

***Māgadhavāntikā prāchyā śourasenyardha-māgadhī
bāhlikā dākṣiṇātyā ca sapta-bhāṣāḥ prakṛitāḥ.***

The following varieties of *Prākṛits* were famous in ancient India.

1. *mahārāṣṭrī*
2. *śourasenī*
3. *māgadhī*
4. *ardhamāgadhī*

Out of these varieties, 1. *mahārāṣṭrī* 2. *śourasenī* 3. *māgadhī* were the dramatic *Prākṛits* and 1. *ardhamāgadhī* 2. *mahārāṣṭrī* 3. *śourasenī* were used in Jaina canon. *Mahārāṣṭrī* was considered to be the *Prākṛit* par excellence (*prakṛṣṭha*). The great *prākṛit* grammarian *Vararuci* in the 12th chapter of his text *Prākṛita prakāśa*, after explaining some rules to *śourasenī*, had left out saying “the remaining is like *mahārāṣṭrī*”². Therefore the women characters, which speak *śourasenī* in dramas, shift to *Mahārāṣṭrī* during their singing. *Mahārāṣṭrī* is used in *Prākṛit* epics such as the “*Gauḍavaho*.” This *Mahārāṣṭrī* was not just the invention of poets, but it was based on the old spoken languages of the region, which was on the bank of *Godāvarī* River. *Śourasenī* was spoken in *śūrasena*, the region around *mathurā*. This variety is used in *Sanskrit* dramas. Only ladies and *vidūśaka* had to use this variety. But in a “*saṭṭaka*” named “*karpūra mañjarī*” one can observe that the king also speaks in *śourasenī*. *śourasenī* seems to be the nearest to *Sanskrit*. This may be because it was born in the region where classical *Sanskrit* literature originated. It forms the intermediate stage between *Sanskrit* and *Hindi* of that region. Thus, with constant closeness with sacred *Sanskrit* language and being influenced by the *Sanskrit*, *śourasenī* could not progress independently.

Māgadhī was one of the famous varieties of *Prākṛits* in those days. It was spoken in the eastern part of India. *Madaghā* region in ancient India was the land in which this *Prākṛit* was current. Like *śourasenī*, this *Prākṛit* was also used in *Sanskrit* dramas by low characters, and it was used in “*mṛccakaṭikam*” of *śūdraka*. *Māgadhī* differs from other dialects of *Prākṛits* in its phonetics. For example, “*sa*” is replaced by “*śa*” and “*ra*” by “*la*”. Many scholars, especially Sri Lankan monks, have called *Pāli* as *Māgadhī*. But in *Pāli*, we never find such changes. So the question remains that the *Māgadhī* used in *Sanskrit* plays like “*mṛccakaṭikam*” of *śūdraka* was the same of present-day *Pāli*? All *āgamās* or canonical literature of *Jains* is collected and preserved in ‘*ardhamāgadhī*’ *Prākṛit*. This dialect is so-called (‘*ardhamāgadhī*’-*half-māgadhī*) as it was mainly based on the dialect, which was in vogue between ‘*śūrasena*’ and ‘*magadhā*’ and therefore it naturally resembles the ‘*māgadhī*’ in its phonetic character for some extent. It has older grammatical traces than *śourasenī*; hence it is freer from the influence of *Sanskrit*.

² ‘śeṣam mahārāṣṭrī-vat’- *Danḍin* says that “*Mahārāṣṭrī* is the variety par excellence “*mahārāṣṭrāśrayām bhāṣām prakṛṣṭham Prākṛitam viduḥ*” -12th chapter, *Kāvyaḍarṣa*, 1.35.

Prakrit languages were sources to all Indian languages. It is not appropriate to understand the very ancient status of these languages with an understanding which developed out of politicized language policies prevailed at the present day. Unfortunately, even the ancient language issue is politicized in India. Scholars should come out of this political narrow-mindedness. Of course, Vedic literature is available in various languages, which is now called Vedic Sanskrit (Sanskrit Grammarians called it Chandas) or chandas. Likewise, early Jain literature is in Prakrit, and early Buddhist literature is in Pali. But based on this situation, if someone thinks that these languages were spoken only by those particular religious communities or sects in ancient India, it is a misconception and not acceptable for numerous obvious historical reasons. All people, in general, used these languages.

Hence identifying these languages with a particular sect or religion is a mistake. Indians and all those who want to learn these languages should make their humble attempt to study them without identifying them with a particular group, sect, and religion. Such noble effort will unfold the unknown mysteries of our past. Māgadhī (Pali) is highly influenced the Indian languages and literature as it could reach almost every corner of India due to its affiliation with Buddha-dharma. If we carefully analyze the relation between the Kannaḍa and Pali, we can understand that the Pali had influenced Kannaḍa and also Kannaḍa had influenced the Pāli. This influence was mutual. Even Sanskrit has borrowed words from other languages. Mr. Ferdinand Kittel, in his dictionary named ‘A Kannaḍa English Dictionary,’ has clearly explained that the words mīna, pīlu, kuntala, herambha, palāṇḍu, punnāga, marīca, vrīhi, aṭavī, putra, mandira, kharjūra, kśipu, puṭṭa, śanku, balākā, etc. words have entered into Sanskrit from south Indian languages. The languages, which were spoken in south India, are none other than the Prākritis. Bharata in his Nāṭyaśāstra mentioned them as ‘Dākṣiṇātyah.’ Rolamba and Tālūra words are the deśī words which were wrongly identified as Sanskrit words. This was clearly pointed by Hemacandra in his Deśīnāmamālā “**rolambaśabdaṁ saṁskṛte’pi kecid-gatānugatikatayā prayunjate**”³. Therefore one must be very careful when he translates the Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Pali texts.

Present status of Pali in India and the world:

Many people think that Pali is a dead language in the world. But Pali is still spoken in some circles in India, Laos, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. In Cambodia, there were great scholars of Pali, but due to the genocide and civil wars, which took place in this country, all scholars of Pali were killed. This is a regrettable incident. Now Cambodian monks are reviving Pali in their Paḍoḍas and Buddhist universities. The canonical texts were written down in Sri Lanka in the first century B.C. E., Pali was a living language there at that time. Pali literature includes Buddhist philosophical works, poetry, and some grammatical works. Some of the texts in Pali are Jātaka tales, Dhammapada, Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā and Dīpavaṁsa, and Mahāvaṁsa. Some of the prominent Pali grammarians are Kaccāyana and Moggallāna, who had extended their significant contribution to the grammar of Pali.

³ Deśīnāmamālā, 7-2’s vivṛti

Studies of Pali are taking place in many parts of the world. There is also a Pali University in Sri Lanka. There are Pali institutes in Thailand and other southeast Asian countries. Though there is no number of universities and institutions of Pali in India like that of Sanskrit, Pali studies are not entirely ignored in India. India, which is the source of Pali, is once again concentrating on the promotion of Pali. There are graduate and post-graduate departments in Calcutta, Banaras, Nālandā, Nāgpur, and Pune. In some universities situated in these places, even P. G. and Ph. D. degrees are offered in Pali. It is excellent that now even Karnāṭka has geared up for the Pali promotion by establishing a Pali institution.

Translation of Pali texts:

There are various words in Pali that often get translated into English but appear not to be much helpful. Translations of terms of this ancient language, Pali must help us to understand the real sense used by the Buddha. Usually, we translate ‘Dukkha’ as suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness. But Dukkha is best left untranslated as we cannot get equivalent in English. It does mean both “suffering” and “stress.” Still, it also means “unsatisfactoriness,” basically “getting what one does not want” and “not getting what one does want” (*yam piccham na labhati, tampi dukkho-Abhidhammapiṭaka*). It covers all those little niggling feelings through which one feels that life is not perfect. In fact, according to some scholars, the word *Dukkha* means a bummer⁴. I want to give some translations from Pali to English done by me. In one in one of the verses of the Pali text ‘SUTTANIPĀTA’ Buddha appears advising –

सीहो'व सहेसु असन्तसन्तो
वातो'व जालम्हि असज्जमानो।
पदुमं व तोयेन अलिप्पमानो
एको चरे खगविसाणकप्पो⁵॥

English translation:

“Like a lion not frightened by sounds, like a wind not caught in a net, like a lotus not touched by the water, an ascetic wonderer should roam all alone like a rhinoceros.” We often find the similarities between Pali and Sanskrit literatures. Like some of the Lotus similes occurs in ‘Jarāsutta’ of Suttanipāta in which the momentary-ness of life is depicted in a lucid poetic style. “In what way the water drop cannot stick to the lotus petals, so also the sage stands unattached with the false views, false wisdom and false theories of the world.”

उदबिन्धु यथापि पोक्खरे
पदुमे वापि यथा न लिप्पति।
एवं मुनि नोपलिप्पति

⁴ An unpleasant or depressing experience, especially one induced by a hallucinogenic drug; a disappointment, failure.—oxford English dictionary, for example, “it was a real bummer being ill on holiday” —see Longman dictionary of contemporary English, page 195.

⁵ Suttanipāta 3.37

यदिदं दिट्टिसुतं मुत्तेसु वा ६॥

Here we can find a similarity between Pali and Sanskrit literatures. Sage Vyāsa says in ‘Bhagavadgītā’ that “He, who acts offering all actions to God (Brahma), abandoning the attachment, remains untouched by the sin like a lotus petal by the water.

ब्रह्मण्यादाय कर्माणि

सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा करोति यः ।

लिप्यते न स पापेन

पद्मपत्रमिवाम्भसा⁷॥

Let me conclude this topic of Pali translation that the exact translation is possible only within the field of mathematics. Two and two make four, this is the exact translation. But in language even the simplest translation is the approximate translation only. Therefore we have to use nearest word for conveying the real meaning of either Sanskrit or Tibetan or Pali language. But the best method to understand the Buddhism is to learn the source languages like Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan.

Early translations:

If we want to understand the most ancient works of translations we have to study the works of Bhadanta Buddhaghosa. He was a 5th-century Indian Buddhist commentator and scholar. Buddhaghosa was reputedly responsible for an extensive project of synthesizing and translating a large body of Sinhala commentaries on the Pāli Canon. His Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification) is a comprehensive manual of Theravada Buddhism that is still studied today. The Mahāvamsā ascribes many books to Buddhaghosa’s composition, some of which are not believed to have been his works, but rather were composed later and attributed to him. Below is a listing of the fourteen commentaries traditionally ascribed to Buddhaghosa. They are Pāli atthakatha texts on Pāli Tipitaka texts.

Pali Tipitaka		Buddhaghosa’s Commentary
from the Vinaya Pitaka	Vinaya (general)	Samantapasadika
	Patimokkha	Kankhavitani
from the Sutta Pitaka	Digha Nikaya	Sumangalavilasini
	Majjhima Nikaya	Papañcasudani
	Samyutta Nikaya	Saratthappakasini
	Anguttara Nikaya	Manorathapurani
	from the Khuddaka Nikaya	Khuddakapatha
Dhammapada		Dhammapada-atthakatha
Sutta Nipata		Paramatthajotika (II),

⁶ Suttanipāta, ‘Jarāsutta’ verse-9

⁷ Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā V. 10

			Suttanipata-atthakatha
		Jataka	Jatakathavannana, Jataka-atthakatha
from the Abhidhamma Pitaka	Dhammasangani		Atthasalini
	Vibhanga		Sammohavinodani
	Dhatukatha		Pañcappakaranatthakatha
	Puggalapaññatti		
	Kathavatthu		
	Yamaka		
Patthana			

While traditional accounts list Buddhaghosa as the author of all of these works, the current Consensus among scholars accepts only the Visuddhimagga and the commentaries on the first four nikāyas as Buddhaghosa's work.

Survey Pali translations in Indian languages:

Governments of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have given grants for the translation of Pali Texts into Telugu and Kannada. The Pali-Telugu Tipitaka project is entrusted to Mahābodhi Society, Bangalore founded by the late Achārya Buddharakkhit in 1956. As part of this project, the following Pali texts are translated with Pali Text in Telugu script on the left page and Telugu Translation on the right.

Completed Translations:

Dhammapada
Visuddhi Magga (Pali text not given)
Sutta Nipāta (Both Pali and Telugu)
Vinaya Piṭaka – Part 1 – Bhikkhu Vibhanga

Translations underway:

Milinda Pañha
Anguttara Nikāya
Udāna and Itivuttaka
Nidāna Kathā
Jātaka kathā –Vol 1 with 100 stories (pali text not given)
Thera gāthā

List of Completed Texts in Kannada Tipitaka Project

Dīgha Nikāya – 3 Vol (Pali and Kannada)
Majjhima Nikāya – 6 Vol (Pali and Kannada)
Jātaka – 5 Vol (Pali and Kannada)
Khuddaka Pāṭha Pali – 1 Vol (Pali and Kannada)
Sutta Nipāta – 1 Vol (Pali and Kannada)
Milinda Pañha – 1 Vol (Pali and Kannada)

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There are some Marāṭhī translations too.

Sidhartha Jatak (सिद्धार्थ जातक) (Vol.1 to 7) translated in to Marāṭhī. Udān (उदान), Visuddhimagga Sar (विसुद्धीमग्ग सार), Abhidhammatthasangaho, **vfHk/kEeRFklaxgks**, Jātaka Kathasangrah (Bhag- 1 to 3) (जातक कथा संग्रह: भाग -1-3).

Rāshtriya Sanskrit Sansthān:

Rāshtriya Sanskrit Sansthān, the Deemed University at Delhi, (Sansthān is upgraded as Central Sanskrit University recently) has translated Pali texts into English and Hindi and Sanskrit. They also run A bi-annual journal in the field of Pali and Prakrit named “Pāli Prākṛit Anusīlanam” (A bi-annual journal of Pāli and Prākṛit language and literature from Rāshtriya Sanskrit Sansthān). The following Pali texts were translated into English, Hindi, and Sanskrit.

Khuddakapāthapāli, Udānapāli and Itivuktapāli – Translated in Sanskrit Hindi and English.

Suttanipāthapāli – Translated in Sanskrit Hindi and English.

Vimānavatthupāli and Petavathupāli - Translated in Sanskrit and Hindi.

Theragāthāpāli and Therīgāthāpāli- Translated in Sanskrit and Hindi

Sanyuttanikāyapāli- Translated in Sanskrit and Hindi

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