

New Prakrit Courses at SOAS

Renate Söhnen-Thieme

At SOAS, research on Prakrit has a long tradition, with well-known scholars like Sir Ralph Turner, John Brough, Robert Williams, and Padmanabh S. Jaini. This has been continued more recently by John Gray and Clifford Wright. Major works in this field were J. Brough's *The Gandhari Dharmapada* (1962), R. Williams's *Jaina Yoga* (1963), and Turner's *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages* (1966), with Wright as co editor. The latter also published a volume of Addenda (1985) and continued working on a project of supplementing the Dictionary, as more evidence from the vast bulk of literature in Prakrit and Apabhraṃśa was being made accessible in new editions. In this project Prakrit specialists like Edith Nolot, Christine Chojnacki, and Kornelius Krümpelmann were also successively employed. John Gray and an erstwhile colleague Satya Ranjan Banerjee have both made contributions to the study of the Prakrit grammarians at the School.

Teaching of Pali and Prakrit was always firmly integrated into the original four-year BA Sanskrit and two-year MA Sanskrit courses. Prakrit prose and lyric verse were studied in the contexts of classical Indian drama and Indian poetic theory. As the earliest historical sources of ancient India, Prakrit inscriptions were studied as options within both Sanskrit and History degree courses. Eventually an MA Prakrit course offered various options: 'A selected genre of Prakrit literature', 'Apabhraṃśa literature', 'History and grammar of the Prakrit Language', and 'Prakrit epigraphy'.

With the implementation of the course-unit system and the drastic reduction of teaching staff in the Sanskrit section, the old teaching-intensive full BA degree course had to be given up. Instead a new BA half-degree in Sanskrit was introduced, to be coupled with another subject (mostly supplied by the newly established Department for the Study of Religions). The MA degrees in Sanskrit and Prakrit also disappeared, but some Sanskrit-based MA courses were provided within the framework of other MA programmes in the School.

Now, with the new appointment of a full-time staff member to the Sanskrit section, the choice of courses on offer can be more diversified. Fresh interest stirred up by members of the Centre of Jaina Studies (founded in March 2004 at the Department of the Study of Religions) has led to a closer cooperation between the Centre and the South Asia Department. As a result, two new half-unit courses in Prakrit have been designed, which will be run from the next session (2008-09) onward. It is hoped that this interest will increase, leading to more advanced courses on Jain literature read in the original Prakrit [there is of course Jain literature in other languages ...].

In order to provide familiarity with basic linguistic features of the language, required for reading source texts in the original language, the first of the new half-unit courses will provide an introduction to the linguistic structure



Citrakalpasūtra

of Prakrit, complemented with some basic grammar exercises. This will be accompanied by the study of extracts from the Jain narrative text *Manipaticarita*, which comprises verses in both the classical Māhārāshtri and old Māgadhī dialects of Prakrit. This entertaining tale provides insight into the Prakrit oral story-telling tradition that not only adds spice to the Jain didactic literature, but also underlies the classical literary genres of prose and verse romance and operatic drama. This introductory course will be conducted in roman transliteration, as used in the more critical and satisfactory editions of Jain texts. It does not necessarily presuppose any knowledge of a pre-modern Indian language (although students with some knowledge of Sanskrit or Pali will find access to Prakrit more easily). Students of the Jain tradition (including MA and research students) may select this option instead of Pali or Sanskrit.

The second half-unit course is designed for those who want to deepen their understanding of Prakrit and to continue reading Prakrit texts in the original. The selection of these texts will partly depend on the specific interest of the individual group. For students from a Jain background or with an interest in the religion the emphasis will be on excerpts from the Jain scriptures and narrative literature, but a part of the class time will also be dedicated to other important contributions of Prakrit to classical Indian culture, such as inscriptions and court poetry. The course will normally be concerned with material available in roman transliteration.

Although these courses are examined when taken as part of a BA or MA degree programme, they may be also useful for research students whose topic is concerned with the history, culture, or religious development of the times that produced documents written in Prakrit.

Renate Söhnen-Thieme is a Senior Lecturer in Sanskrit, Department of the Languages and Cultures of South Asia at SOAS.