



SANSKRIT - LANGUAGE OF THE BUDDHISTS?

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India is a recent state created by the conjunction of three historical sequences: The old civilization dominated by the Sanskrit language; the Mughal civilization where Persian and Muslim components were predominant; and mostly the British colonization that opened India to the contemporary world.

In the 18th and especially the 19th centuries, the Sanskrit language discovered by the Europeans left them intoxicated, having essentially turned them towards the past; they now had access to some of the oldest texts in the world. Unlike Germany, French Indianism did not completely lose its mind over Sanskrit, and began to study the language at the beginning of the 20th century. But the idea of the great antiquity of Vedic and other texts (and therefore of Indian writing) was a kind of ineradicable dogma.

Before The Discovery Of The Ashoka Edicts.

The religious texts of India do not translate any historical reality nor clarify historically the history of India. For that, it is necessary to turn to the testimonies of foreign authors, generally Greek ones. Hence the importance of monuments, which very early became the initial point of support for the historical reconstruction of the past. In 1801, we discovered the first datable inscription – which we attributed to a king by the name of Ashoka (circa 260 BC). Then were found a set of edicts of this same Indian sovereign. Both finds became rare and firm islands in the sea of fog that is otherwise the history of India.

Grandson of [Chandragupta](#), the founder of the [Maurya dynasty](#), [Ashoka](#) completed the unification of India, begun by his grandfather and continued by his [father](#). He governed a kingdom that encompassed the entire sub-continent (except for the extreme south of the peninsula), as well to the north, [Gandhara](#) and part of [Bactria](#), and then won over the Hellenistic kingdoms that were the consequence of the conquest of Alexander.

European Indianism made Ashoka a convinced Buddhist, and attributed to him the organized diffusion of Buddhism throughout Asia, with “missionaries” being sent out, and a grand council, whose legendary character is now well established.

However, neither the Sanskrit known by the literary tradition, nor the religious language of the Vedic hymns is the language of Ashoka. Nor is it one of the Prakrits, (languages that have disappeared but are

consecrated either by dramatic or religious literature). His inscriptions are everywhere written in a dialect which is distinct from Pali, especially by the phonetics (which therefore makes it not Pali), and which thus makes it possible to write the different dialects of the Ashokan empire – that of West India ([Girnar recension](#)); the dialect of north-west India (the inscription of [Kapur-di-Giri](#)); the dialect of Eastern Hindustan (the [inscriptions](#) of Orissa). We knew nothing about this alphabet, when we discovered the first edicts on stone, or on a column. And it was not until 1837 that a young English engineer, [James Prinsep](#), succeeded in deciphering them. We called this “Indian” alphabet, [Brahmi](#).

We know today that these inscriptions were “proclaimed,” and that the engraved edict was a kind of witness, so that the people did not forget the royal instructions of an empire under the close surveillance of a solidly organized administration. Three decades later, another series of Ashokan inscriptions were discovered – but in another alphabet, called [Kharosthi](#) (also called Gandharan). In north-western India, none of the Mauryan rulers had touched local customs. Ashoka just left an old bureaucracy, probably effective, in the south and east, comprised of officials from other parts of the empire, regions formerly under-administered, or whose loyalty remained doubtful.

The Role Of Émile Sénart: The Linguistic History Of India

In France, the one who studied Ashoka's language was the Indianist [Émile Sénart](#). But it is less the language of the king that interested him than the difficult question of the linguistic history of India, of which he wanted to try to lay some foundations. In a small, dense, and concise article written in 1886, he took up the analysis made in his work on [Ashoka's inscriptions](#). He attacked a double dogma: that of the antiquity of Indian texts in general and that of the antiquity of Sanskrit.

Traditionally, there were three types of Sanskrit: the Vedic language (an archaic Sanskrit), classical Sanskrit, and the group of Prakrits. But Sénart added a fourth category – an idiom “in a way intermediate between Sanskrit and Prakrit” – the dialect of the [Gathas](#), used in fragments and versified by northern Buddhist literature, but also in secular works (such as a [treatise on arithmetic](#)).

Why, Sénart wondered, was Sanskrit not used by King Ashoka, which in its “literary” form would have been adequate for official or literary use? The answer is simple – because this literary Sanskrit, in its written form, did not exist in the time of Ashoka.

But if it did not exist in its written form, it did indeed exist elsewhere, sheltered in the schools, where it was developed without any other application than the cult from which it hardly dissociated itself, and within the dominant religion, Brahminism. The Vedas dominate. The Vedic hymns are the eternal word that regulates everything, that decides everything; worship governed by Vedic ritual is the source of all prosperity in this world and in the next.

In the history of Indian scriptures and Sanskrit, the presence of the Brahmins and of their language has been essential. Sanskrit is the standard language. The distance between the truth that they state and the reality that they inspire (or imagine themselves inspiring) characterizes the Brahmins, as does the relationship that they have established with their language of worship – the language that states the fixed norm, unchangeable and sacred, which governs the Word that must also be sacred. Through the transmission of ancient songs, these Brahmins found themselves in possession of an idiom that belonged to them in their own right. Exclusive depositaries through oral tradition of a religious literature on which their authority was based; and they have shown themselves reluctant to relinquish their monopoly.

From the analysis of language, the Brahmins draw consequences, sometimes surprising, on the world, on its structure, its future, on things, or on man: "There is the blue sky, the sea, the stars and ... Sanskrit," which is, as the grammarian Patañjali says (around 200 BC?), "the support of the world order." Hence the weight of grammar, as [Michel Angot](#) rightly noted, has an almost metaphysical dimension. All traditional knowledge adopts the method developed by the master-founders of the grammar of [Panini](#) and [Patañjali](#). Adopting the old archaic Vedic language, the Brahmins thus adapted it to their spiritual and intellectual needs to work out the Sanskrit which they thus fixed, perpetuated and made sacred. The development of this language has therefore been almost completely controlled, being subject to this small group of statutory scholars.

At the time of Ashoka's reign, in the 3rd century BC, what therefore existed was an archaic religious language that was essentially liturgical, and the object of a certain culture. Buddhists, on the contrary, might have been rather in a hurry to use writing to spread their doctrine. And their relationship to speech was not that of the Brahmins. For the latter, what was first, was the sacred Word. For the Buddhists, it was the "Law," allegorized by the key moment of the "gesture" of the Buddha – [the sermon of Benares](#), when he formulated his preaching for the first time. Now the "Law" and the "Word/preacher" were on the same plane. But that was not formulated doctrinally; and whatever the moment when this gesture of the Buddha was elaborated and transmitted, the Brahmins were not be

mistaken: Buddhism was an enemy religion.

Speaking of this legendary Sanskrit language, S nart said aptly that if we attributed all authority to it, it is pure fiction. We sit her on a throne, but she is dead. Indianists called it "archaic" or "Vedic Sanskrit" to distinguish it from classical Sanskrit and corrupt Sanskrit. It was [Colebrooke](#) who made the first distinction between states of the Brahminic language, which the Sanskritizing Indianists then readily adopted.

On the basis of this idiom, which was primarily religious and liturgical, the priestly caste no doubt created a learned language, which may have had profane use. But the idiom thus created could not long remain an instrument without use in the hands that forged it. Modified by the reaction of popular writing on religious language, Sanskrit once "thrown into general circulation" passed to the status of literary language, and entered the secular sphere and found new applications. In other words, it was secularized.

What is called classical Sanskrit was born and became the standardized language of a specific civilization, by assuming analogically the role that elsewhere was played by Greek or Latin. A language of scholars, it took the name of *samskrita vac*, "refined word;" that is to say, prepared according to the canons of Panini's grammar. It then became the language of the spiritual; and it was reserved for this job. A largely artificial language, it was now a "language of thought," to use Michel Angot's expression.

It is this classic Sanskrit that the Germans discovered, as "the egg of Columbus in linguistics," during the "Eastern Renaissance" which intoxicated the great German dreamers of the early 19th century. But was it the language of the Buddhists? There is nothing to suggest it. S nart made the assumption that King Ashoka, with the edicts engraved almost everywhere in his kingdom (in particular on the borders), played an eminent role in this event, which constitutes the emergence of classic Sanskrit. He did not have his edicts engraved in Sanskrit, but in a unique alphabet (Brahmi) which made it possible to write the different Prakrits spoken in the different regions of his kingdom, in particular in Peninsular India. And in the northwest regions, it was another alphabet entirely, this one from Aramaic (Kharosthi), in which he had these edicts engraved with a religious, but above all a political, purpose. Before their Hellenization, linked to the conquest of Alexander, these regions of the northwest were included in the great Achaemenid federal state, that which the Macedonian took over. The language chosen by the Achaemenids was Aramaic, the "lingua franca" of the ancient world. We can thus legitimately assume that it was under the influence of the Hellenized scribes, in their meeting with Indian scribes, that these

Ashokan alphabets were designed.

If the language of Ashoka was not Sanskrit – if it did not appear in its written form until about a century later, and then in its grammatically fixed form another century later – at what point was this presumed Buddhist canon fixed? And was it in Sanskrit?

The Role Of The Buddhists

Buddhists were recruited into the Brahminic caste, as into the others, and were introduced, to a certain extent, to its knowledge, including linguistic. And over time, they were also able to form themselves as a class of scholars who eventually adopted Sanskrit, first to communicate with the Brahmins, and then as a religious language. As the use of Sanskrit led to the scholarly immobilization of the language, there was thus fashioned a convenient literary instrument which allowed the grammatical elaboration of Prakrits, those languages which had a literature. This is how the northern Buddhists, in their mixed Sanskrit, deployed Prakritic spellings that resembled literary Sanskrit. This also explains how their spelling in "mixed" Sanskrit (a term that Indians prefer to the perceived depreciative phrase, "corrupt Sanskrit"), tended to come closer and closer to correct Sanskrit. And this can help shed some light on the mystery of these legendary "Buddhist Scriptures."

If classical Sanskrit has undoubtedly been the subject of an elaboration by the Brahmins, (and on this point we can follow S nart), it was the Buddhists who indirectly caused its diffusion. Unlike the Brahmins, they were animated by a strong missionary spirit, eager to spread their doctrines by all means. Early attempts at writing, undoubtedly gradually, introduced into circulation the processes of a fixed and learned spelling – with probably less mastery than the Brahmins. At least at first.

If, as it has sometimes been argued, that Pali was, despite [Magadhi](#), fixed in Western India, its relatively archaic character can be explained either by the tendency for etymological spelling, sensitive to the North West; or (during the period of development of classical Sanskrit) by the divergence of the tradition among rival sects, to then become immobilized in each of them. This could explain the two identifiable and identified traditions: One in Pali, the other in Sanskrit. But this does not account for Magadhi, with many Indianists even claiming that the language of the Buddha could be Magadhi.

But it was apparently in Sanskrit that Buddhism continued to expand outside the subcontinent. To

understand this, it suffices to remember that in the first century AD, it was the Kushans from the steppes who took possession of this entire area of North-West India and part of the Maurya kingdom. And they chose two languages of chancellery, Sanskrit and "[Bactrian](#)," another Indo-Aryan language. Their religious indifference largely contributed to the expansion of Buddhism out of its original cradle (in southern Nepal). This is how Sanskrit was able to continue its expansion outside the subcontinent. From the third century AD, it undoubtedly began to play the role of language of the Buddhist *koine*. Thus, when Chinese pilgrims set off for India (from the north), in search of the "sacred" texts of Buddhism, which they took to be written in Sanskrit, Sanskrit itself spread throughout Eurasia.

Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, Buddhism disappeared from the Indian lands where it was born; but it persisted outside India, where it had been exported, and with it Sanskrit, despite the tough competition from Persian, linked to the rise of Islam in India. It is this persistence of the sacred language of Brahminism, held (wrongly) for the original language of the doctrine of the Buddha that has resulted in the same texts in Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian, on the basis of a "table" Sanskrit texts. The first corpus of Buddhist texts was collected by the Englishman [Brian Houghton Hodgson](#), in Nepal, where he was stationed. Working in monasteries, he affirmed that Nepalese texts had Sanskrit originals. But often the Sanskrit originals had disappeared, and the remaining text was only known in the language of translation.

The second corpus was collected by [Sándor Csoma de Kőrös](#), a Hungarian who mastered the Tibetan language with heroic dedication, and included in the journal of the Bengal Asian Society, with detailed analyses of the great Tibetan library.

The third corpus was especially cited by Russian orientalism which claimed to have it, as per [Isaac Jacob Schmidt](#).

[Philippe Édouard Foucaux](#), a pupil of [Émile Burnouf](#), who is considered to be the founder of Buddhist studies, had only one Tibetan copy. His Sanskrit copy is very late (18th century); and the first translation was made from the Burmese.

In the 20th century, the expeditions of [Dutreuil de Rhins and Fernand Grenard](#), of [Albert Grünwedel and Albert von le Coq](#), of [Sir Aurel Stein](#), of [Sergey Oldenburg](#), that of [Otani Kozui and Zuicho Tachibana](#) and of [Paul Pelliot](#) and [Louis Valliant](#) unearthed from the sands of Central Asia and [caves of Kansu](#) a mass of documents in various languages (in particular, [Sogdian](#)). Among these texts, the Sanskrit ones

correspond to the sutras translated into Chinese.

What Buddhist Canon?

What then can we say about an alleged Buddhist canon?

It is impossible that a primitive Buddhist canon existed prior to the concomitant written fixation of the orthographic reform described by Séuart, which may have spanned two or three centuries, (from the 2nd century BC to the first century BC).

The French Indianist very clearly posed the question: "Is it believable that a sect, Buddhist, Jain or other, which would have possessed, either written, or an established oral tradition, that is, a definite and consecrated canon, would have consented to modify and to subject canonical writings to a new grammatical regulation? The codification of an idiom specific to the sect and applied to its fundamental texts can only be imagined on the very date when traditions hitherto imperfect or dispersed were united. Fixed earlier in a canonical body, they would have made law; their authority would have made the reform both useless and impossible."

Between the language of Ashoka's edicts and the Prakrit of grammarians, the similarities are obvious; but there is no complete agreement between any of the dialects described by grammarians and those represented by the edicts. Séuart's conclusion is clear: the Brahmi alphabet has no precedence. It is an alphabet designed for Ashoka, probably by scribes at his service.

However, for the same alphabet to adapt to different languages, a deep knowledge of Indian languages was required. It could not have come from the Brahmins, grammarians specialized in Sanskrit, and who, moreover, did not form a body of administrators in the service of the State. These two functions, scribes and administrators, were reserved for a specific caste whose status was always lower than that of the Brahmins, even if some of the latter could participate, as advisers, in the exercise of power. It is undoubtedly a conglomerate of this specific caste of scribes, undoubtedly Hellenized, especially those in the Northwest, who conceived the two alphabets intended for King Ashoka. Whatever the religion of these scribes, the concept of Dharma (Law) was familiar to them. And it could be Buddhist or Hindu or Vedic.

But if the alphabet was designed by the king (or his language technicians) and for his particular use, and if it did not have prior existence, the inscriptions could not be read by anyone. It was therefore necessary to proclaim them. Hence the existence of emissaries sent by the king. "Oyez, Oyez good people, King Ashoka makes his instructions heard for the happiness of his people, and the happiness of his people is to obey Dharma, the Law" – that is, the Law defined and identified by the king. The Mauryan state was indeed a police state, as suggested by [Megasthenes](#), the Greek who spent some time at the court of King Chandragupta. King Ashoka's alleged Buddhist teachings enveloped close administrative surveillance, for political rather than religious ends.

Buddhism: Sect Or Heresy Of Brahminism?

None of the founders of the modern Indian state, Nehru, Gandhi, Jinnah for Pakistan, knew Sanskrit. When they were of Brahmin origin, they sometimes knew some hymns or prayers as we can still know some prayers in Latin, or can know them in Aramaic. The pandits converted to politics. If Sanskrit had been the language of this radiant Buddhism throughout Asia, it is difficult to believe that we cannot find more originals – especially when you think of the profusion of Buddhist texts in various languages found in the cave of a thousand Buddhas. If we had had a Buddhist canon, "Living Word of the Blessed One," there is no doubt that it would have been preciously preserved by his followers.

When, at Benares, during his first sermon, the Buddha "turned the law," what can it mean except that he instituted by this gesture (whether he existed historically or not) the new legislator: a new [Manu](#) for the Hindu world. As for Brahminism, the preaching of the Buddha claimed to replace this sacred Word, so sacred that it was reserved only for the legislators of the language which conveyed and preserved it. Little wonder that Buddhism competed with both of these religious currents. And that, no doubt, if a primitive canon existed, it was destroyed.

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The [featured image](#) shows the head of the Buddha, Gandhara, ca. 1st-2nd century AD.

