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Prakrit: Literary Trill with Multiple Meanings

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by [Melinda Fodor](#)

Prakrit is a kind of Cinderella among the classical languages of India. Initially a humble language of ordinary communication, it was considered a collection of “incorrect” dialects by the Sanskrit grammarians. Over time, thanks to its unique characteristics, it enjoyed an exceptional rise to become finally the country’s second most distinguished literary language, after Sanskrit. Among its many remarkable qualities lies its soft, polysemous sound, much appreciated in poetry and music.

The term “Prakrit” encompasses several Middle-Indic dialects that were in use from the 2nd millennium BCE to the eighteenth century CE. Originating before our era, Prakrit evolved into a literary language by the first century CE and maintained its prominence until the British colonial period. With various regional dialects, Prakrit can be compared to Italian languages, sharing common features while varying based on regional nuances. Among the numerous regional dialects, four principal Prakrits emerged: Mahārāṣṭrī (spoken in ancient Mahārāṣṭra in southern

India), Śaurasenī (spoken in ancient Śūrasena in central-northern India), Māgadhī (spoken in ancient Magadha in northeastern India), and Paiśācī (spoken in ancient Pañcāla in northwestern India). Collectively, these four dialects are known as literary Prakrits.



The Mahārāṣṭrī, initially referred to simply as “Prakrit” (according to Vararuci in the second century CE), served as a model for defining other dialects based on their divergences. Later, this standard Prakrit was officially named Mahārāṣṭrī (by Daṇḍin in the seventh century), subtly distinguishing it from Vararuci’s Prakrit (as noted by Hemacandra in the twelfth century). It gained recognition not only from grammarians but also from theorists of poetic art, who hailed it as the quintessential Prakrit.

Associated with women, songs and delicate, amorous themes, Prakrit differs from Sanskrit in the softness of its phonemes and the pleasant quality of its sounds. However, its uniqueness extended beyond mere sound; its polysemy allowed for the expression of multiple ideas simultaneously. In this way, prakrit satisfies perfectly the two pillars of Indian poetic art: sound and meaning.

To preserve literary Prakrits, grammarians established phonetic rules for deriving Prakrit from Sanskrit. One key rule involved the generous omission of Sanskrit intervocalic consonants *k, g, c, j, t, d, p, y, v*, particularly in Mahārāṣṭrī. Consequently, terms lacking (or having very few) consonants could convey multiple meanings. For instance, *uia* (sk. *ucita*, meaning ‘appropriate’ or sk. *udita*, meaning ‘spoken’, or *ud-ita*, meaning ‘emerged’); and *pāa* (sk. *pāka*, meaning ‘cooked’, *pāja*, meaning ‘brightness’ or ‘cooked rice’, *pājas*, meaning ‘meal’ or ‘brilliance’, *pāta*, meaning ‘flight’ or ‘fall’, and *pāda*, meaning ‘foot’).

In compositions, the initial single consonant of a word could also be dropped if it does not stand in the initial position. For example, *uiaāa* (sk. *ucita-pāka*, meaning ‘properly cooked’, or *udita-pājas*, meaning ‘emerged brightness’). Theoretically, a nominal composition could consist solely of vowels, such as *āāa-aa-āaa-āa-ao* (sk. *āpāka-gata-pāvaka-pāka-kṛtas*, meaning ‘food

cooked in a fire-set oven'). However, in practice, we rarely encounter structures without any consonant, and this phrase would likely become *āvāa-aa-pāvāa-pāa-ao* or even *āvāa-gaa-pāvāa-pāa-kaa*. But even in this form, the Prakrit text is rich in juxtaposed vowels, offering a wide range of meanings, which simply does not exist in Sanskrit.

Another distinctive feature of Prakrit lies in the nasalisation of vowels. A short vowel followed by an *anusvāra ṁ* can be considered a long syllable, akin to Sanskrit. Yet, this *anusvāra* can also indicate a short, nasalized vowel, a phenomenon peculiar to prakrit. For example: pk. *deviṁ* (long non-nasalized)/*deviṁ* (short nasalized), sk. *deviṁ* (long non-nasalized only) 'queen'.

Thus, the vocal structure of Prakrit readily lends itself to sound bending in Indian music. When singers employ expressive techniques, a unique melodic beauty emerges. Micro-intervals (notes between the Western standard scale) add subtlety and emotion, including glissandos, vibratos and legatos that surpass the limits of mere singing. In Prakrit, identifying significant texts from the vocal inflections of melodies is an additional challenge.

Indian poetics, which are both complex and complete, are full of rules designed to delight the audience in the melody while making it difficult to understand the text, with the aim of eliciting extreme joy (*ānanda*) in the audience, when the poetic idea is grasped. Hence the singular beauty of the Prakrit language in classical Indian poetry, which simultaneously delights the audience phonetically and semantically.



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Melinda Fodor is a specialist in Indian literature and Buddhist philosophy in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, and Tibetan. She focusses on Prakrit literature and poetics, having completed her Ph. D. dissertation on Prakrit drama in 2017 (EPHE-PSL). She catalogued the Pelliot collection of Sanskrit manuscripts at the National Library of France as part of the HisTochText project (2018-2021). A recipient of prestigious fellowships, she has also taught Prakrit at the University of Aix-en-Provence and the University of Rome Sapienza. Since 2021, Melinda Fodor has been teaching Prakrit (beginner and intermediate levels) at ILARA.

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