

A Brief History Of Origin And Development Indian Scripts

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Abstract

The article is about the origin of Indian Script. It discusses the journey of the mother script of all Indian script i.e. The Brahmi Script. While discussing the write-up throws light on the pros and cons of the development of the 'Brahmi Script'. It also tries to discuss some of the regional scripts and their evolution.

Kye Words. Indian Scripts, Brahmi Script

Introduction

The origin of script is very new compared to the existence of humans on earth. Script originated 6000 years ago, and a number of ancient scripts have been found till date, they are Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, pre-Amelia & Maya script. It may be mentioned that the modern languages have directly or indirectly evolved out of these ancient scripts.

The origin of Indian script was firstly traced back to the era of Mauryan regime in 3rd century BC. The rock inscription, Copper plate charter and coin inscriptions of Ashoka's regime were considered to be the oldest inscriptions till the discovery of the twin cities of Mohenjo-Daro & Harappa i.e. The Indus Valley Civilization. The origin of Indian script is thus traced back to 3000 BC and which is found in a more pronounced form in the Mauryan regime. But the relationship of the present Indian script with the oldest one is still a point of disagreement among the palaeographers.

The chronology of Indian script has a proper presentation since the day of Ashoka, the Mauryan king. The chronology starts with the rock inscription, termed as Brahmi script. Equivalent to the ancient Brahmi script was written from left to right while Kharosthi was written from the opposite. Kharosthi was basically found in the north western part of India. But with the passage of time this script lost its existence.

Even though Brahmi is the oldest Indian script, it can't be considered the oldest of all. Since Brahmi script is quite disciplined and matured, it is observed by the paleographers that to gain such an organized form, Brahmi must have gone through phases of evolution. Because the study of other script has reflected that they have passed through phases of continuous progress and change. Historical evidence suggests that script develops from Pictorial script to syllabic script and then gains the matured form. So it is believed that Brahmi script has been born long before the era of Ashoka.

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Some foreign Paleographers have opined that Brahmi is not an Indian script by origin. According to them it is a imported resource from Phoenician region, these scholars have stated that it was the Indian merchants who visited Babylon and Middle east countries for trade and in due course of time picked up the Phoenician style and form of writing. The paleographers claim that this was improved upon and used in Pali Prakrit and this improved script is the Brahmi script. But on the other hand some Scholars such as Dr. F. Mason, John Beem and Cunningham do not accept this view, according to them Brahmi is the mother of Indian script. Among these scholars Cunningham is his book “Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum” published in 1876 has claimed that Brahmi is the origin of Indian script.

The differences of opinion regarding the origin of Brahmi script can be decimated to a great extent if we take a close look at the inscription of the Indus valley civilization. The scripts do not have profound similarities but yet many common features have been observed. The inscriptions of the Indus valley civilization do have similarities with the inscriptions of the Mauryan reign. Some paleographers such as Dr. Dinesh ch. Sarkar, Dr. Rajbali Pandey, R.G states that: ‘it would be reasonable to assume that the Brahmi script in its vary ancient form as a part of proto Brahmi was developed out of the youngest form of the Mahenjodaro script’.

The inscriptions of Brahmi script underwent recognizable changes after the Maurya’s. The dynasties of the Shakas, Shungas and Kshatrapas added certain distinctive features and thus contributed to the changes in the Brahmi script. The reformed inscriptions are visible in writing on rocks and coins and this enlightens the path of the progress of Brahmi script. The discovery of the ‘Hatigumpha inscription’, Mathura rock inscription, Pravash cave inscription, brings the history of development of Brahmi script to the forefront. One of the renowned scholar T.P Verma after comparing the Maurya script with the above mentioned inscriptions opined that the script was “Considerably advanced and it was gaining the capacity to write the Sanskrit language also.”

After the Shunga’s, Shakas and Kshatrapas the regime shifted to the hands of the Kushans during the 1st and 2nd century. The scripts from this period came to be known as Kushan script. The rock inscriptions and coin inscriptions bear distinct changes in appearance from those belonging to the period of its predecessor. These changes during the tenure of the Kushan kings Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva mark a journey of further progress of the Brahmi eastern styles. The evidences of the eastern style are found in Sarnath, Kosambi and Shravasti, Moreover Kushan script of Kanishka’s tenure has been found in Mathura & Allahabad.

The Kushan script evolved further during the 2nd and 3rd century in the Kaushambi writing style. But it entered the golden era of progressive journey from the Kaushambi style to the Gupta script. In fact the Gupta dynasty is regarded as the golden period for Indian. During the days of kings like Shreegupta, Ghatotkacha, Chandragupta, Samudragupta Brahmi flourished in various styles.

In the 6th and the 7th century Gupta script became “Siddhamatrika” scripts and this script became more popular during the era of the king of Thaneshwar, Harshavardhana. After the death of Harshavardhana, “Siddhamatrika” script’s three new styles were born (i) Sharadha or North West style (ii) Shreeharsha or South West style (iii) Kutil or East style.

Sharadha script is the mother of Kashmiri Gurumukhi script while Shreeharsha is the mother of Devanagari, Nandinagari. The Nagri script developed in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh and this is

the reason why Nagri script is the origin of Gujarati, Mahajani and Kaithi script. The Maharastriyan scripts also evolved from Devanagri script.

The ornamented and stylish script Kutil is considered the parent of Assamese, Maithi, Manipuri, Bengali, Oriya etc. But if we want to speak about Assamese script in particular, the view that it has evolved from the Kutil script, Surendra Verm's 'Umachal Script' and Nagajori Khanikar Gaon rock inscription were found in Assam. The Kutil Script evolved from 6th century to 9th century but the Umachal and Nagajori inscription has proved that they had existed before 6th century. And it has been noticed that the Gupta Scripts Eastern style has more prominent influence on the Assamese language script. So it may be considered that Assamese has taken to the path of prosperity even before the script of other MIL languages.

Brahmi is also the origin of the Dravidian scripts. Southern Brahmi which evolved during the Gupta era and Pallava's rule is mainly classified into two section – (i) Telgu – Kannada & (ii) Malayalam – Tamil.

Thus we conclude a brief history of evolution of Indian Brahmi Script. It has also been found that most of the scripts of the Asian continent have its origin in Indian Brahmi Script. Thus this co-relation makes the Brahmi Script more popular and makes it more prominent globally.

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