

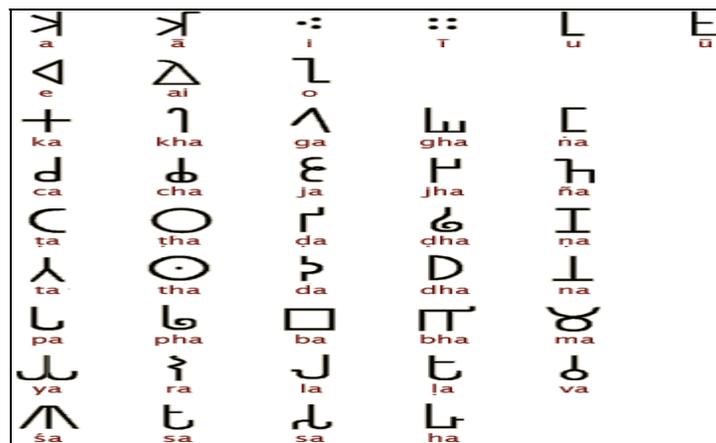
BRHAMI – THE DIVINE SCRIPT



Ashoka inscription at Naneghat, junnar

Brahmi is considered to be one of the most ancient scripts in the sub-continent of India. According to tradition Brahma, the God of Knowledge, is credited with the creation of this script, hence the name Brahmi. However, the antiquity of the writing system in India goes back to the period of the Indus Valley Civilization though the Indus Script has not been convincingly deciphered as yet.

The earliest surviving records of the use of the Brahmi Script are found in the form of the inscriptions of Asoka, the Mauryan Emperor [c. 269 B. C. E. to c. 232 B. C. E.]. He had his message to his subject written on rocks & pillars at various places in his empire. His inscriptions on the trade routes & at important Buddhist places have provided us with evidence of a completely evolved alphabetical writing system in ancient India. Over a period of time, with the regional preferences & specialties the script changed its form & developed into almost all modern Indian Scripts.



Brahmi Alphabets

Until the advent of the British, the natives had completely forgotten the Brahmi Script. Early British Scholars like Sir William Jones had come across stone inscriptions written in Brahmi way back in 1784 AD. The initial attempts to solve the riddle of this script proved futile & the scholarly world had to wait until 1837 AD for the script to be deciphered. Sir James Prinsep

[1799 – 1840 AD] was appointed as an assay master in the Calcutta Mint by the British Government. During the course of his work, he had to handle a number of different types of coins every day. Studying the characters of the inscriptions on them, he began deciphering the script with the help of the coins of the Indo – Greek Rulers.



Brahmi Script in the cave at Kenheri

The Indo – Greek Rulers ruled over the North Western parts of India in around 2ND Century B.C. They had issued their coins with the name & title of the issuer in Greek Script & language along with his portrait on the observe & on the reverse the same matter was given in Brahmi / Kharost hi Script & in Prakrt language. Such coins provided very important clues for Prinsep’s study. Apart from Brahmi, he is also credited with the decipherment of the Kharost hi script, with the help of the coins of the Indo – Greek rulers, soon after 1837 AD.

James Prinsep was not the first person to have been interested in reading the inscriptions on the rocks & pillars in India. In the 15TH Century C.E; Emperor Firuz Shah Tughlaq [1309 to 1388 C.E.] made considerable effort in attempting to read the writings on the pillars of Asoka. He brought two pillars of this Mauryan Emperor from Meerut & Topra to Delhi. Hundreds of his men & elephants were involved in carrying them. The Emperor appointed learned Brahmins to tell him the meanings of the writings on these pillars. The Brahmins somehow escaped the wrath of Firuz Shah & saved their lives. A contemporary account Tarikh – I – Firuzshahi provides some interesting details about these incidents.

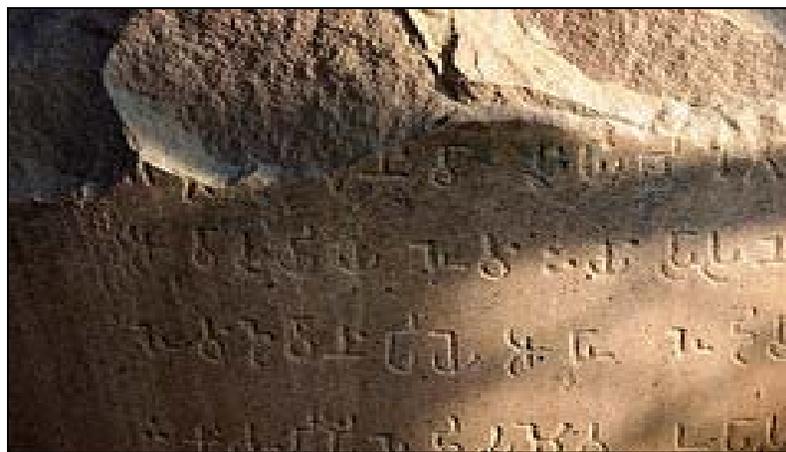
Similarly, the great Mughal Emperor Akbar was also deeply interested in deciphering the same inscriptions. However, even scholars during his period could not oblige him. It was only in the early 19TH Century that the meanings of the numerous inscriptions could be understood.

The deciphering of the Brahmi Script provided a key that could solve many complicated riddles in Indian history too. The most intriguing among these were the inscriptions written on rock surfaces, pillars, walls of monuments & on coins. Since the inscriptions written by Asoka were profusely available, James Prinsep took on the task of deciphering & translating them for the first time. A mine of information was brought to light from the inscriptions. Rock & pillar edicts of Asoka brought out very significant details of the history of ancient India. Hundred of such inscriptions were deciphered & translated after this.

The disciplines of Paleography & Epigraphy were established during this period & studies of the inscriptions got a new impetus. Various native & foreign scholars made huge efforts to decipher & translate hitherto unknown data in English. The inscriptions were categorized into various types by the early scholars on the basis of the content of the inscriptions. They were two major categories – The Royal Charters & Donative Inscriptions. Along with these the Prasastis [eulogies & memorial inscriptions] were also studied in detail. Meanwhile, a number of fresh explorations & excavations were carried out & often the dates mentioned in these inscriptions helped in reconstructing the history of those sites.

Along with the content & relevance of the inscriptions, the Paleography was also studied minutely. Scholars then started thinking about the origin of this script. Some scholars argued that Brahmi was derived from the script of the Indus Valley Civilization. As there was no similarity found in the characters of the pictographs of the Indus Script & the alphabets of the Brahmi Script, this hypothesis was immediately refuted. Considering the similarity of the characters of the Brahmi Script & those of the North Semetic Script, many scholars were of the opinion that the traders of the Semetic world were probably responsible for introducing this script to India. Looking at some different letters in Brahmi & the changes made to suit the Indian languages it was believed that probably in around 8TH – 7TH Centuries B.C.E. the North Semetic Script was introduced in this region by the traders of the ancient world. Later on, the local scholars made certain changes [rather, additions], into the earlier established script, to make it more suitable to local Indian languages and dialects.

For several years this theory was accepted by scholars in the field. Recently some western & a few Indian Scholars have proposed a new theory for the origin of this script. On the basis of the lack of concrete Archaeological & Literary evidence they believed that the script had originated during or shortly before the Mauryan period. Although this theory is very radical & controversial. Some scholars are still inclined towards it even though it has not yet been completely accepted by Academicians.



Brahmi inscription at Sarnath

After the Mauryan period Brahmi Script was used all over the country. We find an extensive use of this in the post Mauryan Art, Architecture & Coinage. It has also been noticed that some changes were made in the use of the diacritic marks for the addition of vowels especially in the case of the alphabet for consonant 'Ja [E]. Instead of elongating the middle line for the inscriptions on the railings of the Stupa at Bharhut. This change indicates some confusion in the earlier form of some character of Brahmi. So this need was probably felt & the writers in Central India made these changes. This could also suggest a regional variety of the script. In this way as

the need was felt & as the popularity of some regional varieties increased, some changes took place in the form of the script. As the practice of writing inscriptions on coins became more & more common, letters were made more bold & stocky probably for the sake of clarity. Similarly, in the case of rock inscriptions in around 1ST – 2ND Century C. E; we notice a nationwide change in the script. The letters are more deeply carved. The curves in the letters have been made angular. The height of the two vertical strokes of different height is made equal – the character for 'Pa' & 'Sa' for instance.



Brahmi Inscription On The Iron Pillar In Qutub Minar Complex, Delhi

In this way, over a period of time, many changes were made in this script. From around 3RD Century C. E. the practice of recording grants on copper plates probably became more popular. Very few records have been found in this material prior to this period. The Traikutaka, Vakataka, Chalukya, Rastrakuta & many others along with the stone inscriptions. Other than these, the ancient inscribed records were also found on the relic caskets, pedestals of images, sculptures, victory pillars, memorial stones, bricks, coins & on metal objects like caskets of gold, silver & copper.

The Brahmi Script was used to write documents throughout the Indian Subcontinent & in many neighbouring countries. In the post Gupta – period, that is after c. 5TH – 6TH Centuries C.E. Brahmi passed through various development stages. Scholars have called it Siddhamatrka, Kutila along with other names. The changes that took place in these variations were also due to the pen technique. This can clearly be seen in the form of letters becoming more decorative & the medial signs becoming more ornamental. From the 8TH Century C. E; the Siddhamatrka Script developed into Sarada Script in Kashmir & Punjab, into proto – Bengali or Gaudi in Bengal and Orissa & into Nagari in other parts of North India. The Nagari Script was used widely in Northern India from the 10TH Century C. E. onwards. The use of Nandinagari, a variant of Nagari Script is mostly confirmed to the Karnataka region.

Some regional variations & popular forms of the script were also noticed in 4TH – 5TH Centuries C. E. Two different regional types have been observed – the box headed script & the nail headed script. It is observed that in Central India during the reign of the Vakataka, rulers & the kings of Sarabhapura & Kosala both of these varieties of Brahmi were used.



Coin Of Western Kshatrapa King Yasodamna With Brahmi Legend

Some of the earliest inscriptions of South India, particularly from Tamil Nadu, which are found engraved on the stone – beds in the caverns, are in Brahmi script with some additional signs corresponding to certain sounds which are peculiar to the Tamil language. Hence, this script is popularly known as Tamil – Brahmi.



Coin of western kshatrapas

The trade & mercantile activities in ancient India made the spread of this script easy in South & South East Asian countries. Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Nepal & Java have derived their scripts from Brahmi with some changes made due to the regional, temporal & linguistic variations.

In this way this script, the name of which claims a divine origin had influenced the ancient world of alphabets. Along with Brahmi another script was extensively used in some parts of ancient India, especially the North – Western regions & it was known as Kharosthi. This script was based mainly on the Aramaic – an ancient script used in Persia. Unlike Brahmi this script was written from right to left.

The use of this script was limited only in the North – western regions including modern Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sindh, Punjab & Rajasthan to a certain extent. Kharost hi is also found quite often on the coins of the Indo – Greek, Kusana & some local rulers in North India. It was in use till c. 3RD Century C. E. & later on it seems to have vanished from the scene. Meanwhile, Brahmi also developed into various regional forms & after the 8TH – 9TH Centuries C. E. the Nagari Script was used widely all over the country. By 11TH Century C. E. Brahmi had completely vanished from the scene, only to be deciphered in the 19TH Century.