

Reappraising the ancient Indian writing system and the engraving style (Circa 600 to 300 B.C.)

Rina Singh,

Research Scholar, Banaras Hindu University, India

Abstract

Before we discuss the Aśokan Brāhmī and its inscriptions, we will make a rapid survey of various sources written in this script. For better understanding, we will firstly focus on the major rock edicts in the first section, which have supplied valuable data for studying different style of script writing. In the similar manner, Pillar rock edicts will be discussed in the second section. In the third section, we will address an account of minor rock edicts, which represent interesting features of the script in the developing phase. Finally, we will provide an account of the inscriptions together with their special palaeographical features, which have been utilized for representing the Brāhmī Alphabet of the region in question.

KEYWORDS: Engraving, Edict, decipherment, script, carving

As we know, the Indus script is the earliest script of ancient India that is wrote by Indus people on seals, sealing, pottery etc. It was pictographic script, and written from left to write, but until date have not been decipherable¹, so unless we will have to accept Brāhmī script as ancient-script of India. Both of the Chinese and Indian traditions are unanimous the point-that the two main script were prevalent-in ancient Indian subcontinent - first one is the Brāhmī and the second Kharosthi. However, unless not discovery at the Harappa script; there was no evidences of writing- belonging to the period between the 4th thousand BC and to 5th century BC in India. It was believed that the Monogenic nature of writing by scholars because the positive evidences on writing for this period were discovered in west Asia but some scholars gave his opinion regarded the indigenous origin of Brāhmī². It is not clear that what script was most prevalent in ancient time weather the people's thought had taken in concrete visual form, though we come across during Maurya period, (Aśoka) we get engraved evidence on rock and pillar inscription's surface³. That script is called Brāhmī script. The Brāhmī script was successfully deciphered by James principle in 1835.

In the Vedic period, people did know that art of writing but that time a vast literature were ignorant of writing because they were committed to memory and handed down from one generation to other. The Vedic Aryan's **Akshara, Varana, Māntrā** occurring in the Upanishads that time oral traditions played on important part in teaching. It is only when we come down to the 600 BC the age of Buddha that we have found some references of writing, which were form for the 'Pitaka'.⁴

Until the Indus, script is unread then only the most ancient Brāhmī script will have to accept. Brāhmī script was prevalent before Aśoka (the mourya emperor) because the first evidence get from 4th century BC, as Piparahwa 'Dhatu Manjusa' and Sohagaura inscription then it is used to Aśokan stone pillar and cave inscriptions also⁵. Buddhist literature 'Lalitavistara', refers to the Presence of 64 scripts among which ' Brāhmī or Bammī head, and the Jain suttas, Samavayanga, Pannayanga and most important Bhagvatisuttas refers 18 script whereas Brāhmī was occupied top position.⁶

Other references, we get to origin of Brāhmī script in Chinese encyclopaedia name Fa-Wa-Su-Lin (668 Ad). This Chinese text gives reference of Brāhmī, Kharoshti and Chinese script according to order⁷. It also says that Brāhmī was written from left to right while other from right to left. However, there is controversy that none of the early literature refers to Brāhmī script and Aśoka pillar inscription's script- is same.

Brāhmī script is correlated to Brahmā. It is considered that Brahmā was the originator of this script then its name Brāhmī. It is believed that Brahma invented this script. It was mainly were used by The Brahmāna, whose prepared manuscript for next generation.

Chinese encyclopaedia mentioned that three divine teachers including Brahmā invented art of writings. He used to extremely popular and his script began to be written from left to right. The second one was the Khoroshti, that begin from write to left, third one was 'Tsa' (RI) or Chinese script that was written from up to down, among the all three, Brāhmī was superior and used in India.

It is generally believed that the formal writing tradition in India began in the Maurya Period, when Asoka created a script in the third century B.C. Asoka's primary mode of addressing religious social issues and practices to his people was rock edicts. Brāhmī is the name given to the script in which majorities of the Aśokan inscriptions were written. During Aśokan reign at least four scripts used in his inscriptions. In the Pakistan area, Kharoshthi script and the Afghanistan area, Aramaic and Greek scripts were used, while in the rest of his empire, from Kalsi to North, Bengal to east up to Mysore in the south, covering almost whole sub-continent, his edicts are written in the Brāhmī script. But the most peculiar feature in both of these scripts is that these use Prakrit language. They are different in the assignment of formal signs to individual letters of the Prakrit. These features point towards many things. Firstly, the use of Prakrit language was prevalent in the whole sub-continent Pakistan Area.⁸ We know that the Aramaic script was written from right to left in direction and the Kharoshthi of the Pakistan area was written from right to left. Since Aramaic and Greek scripts were long in use in the north- western part of Mauryan Empire, it is not unreasonable to believe that there must have been some script in use in the rest of sub-continent before the Asokan Brāhmī was created.⁹ Brāhmī was a creation of Mauryan period, gradually it is accepted that before the Aśokan adopted it.

The Edicts of Aśokan period is in total 33. These inscriptions of Mauryan Period are written on Pillars, Rock and cave walls during the reign of Emperor Ashok, these are dispersed throughout the Indian Sub-continent covering whole India. These inscriptions are found scattered in more than thirty places throughout India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Aśokan edicts, which comparatively the earliest decipherable corpus of written documents from India, have survived throughout the centuries, as they are written on rocks, boulders, cave and stone pillars. These pillars in particular are testimony of the technological advancement of ancient Indian civilization. These inscriptions are divided into three broad sections – Major Rock Edicts, Pillar Rock Edicts, and Minor Rock Edicts. Fundamentally, there must have been many of them, however only ten with inscriptions still survive. These were forty to fifty feet in height, and weighing up to approximately fifty tons each, all the pillars were quarried from Chunar, located in south of Varanasi and transported, sometimes hundreds of miles, to where they were erected. A lion, bull, or horse originally capped each pillar, and these are the masterpieces of Indian art. The edicts on pillars are all found in very specific places, like Lumbini pillar was erected at the Buddha's birthplace. The location of the rock edicts is governed by the availability of

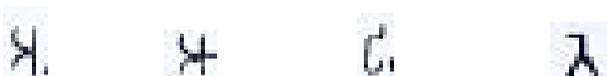
suitable rocks. The contents of Asoka's edicts make it clear that all the legends about his wise and humane rule are more than justified, and qualify him to be ranked as one of the greatest rulers. In his edicts, he spoke of what might be called individual morality and state morality. In these edicts, Buddhism is also mentioned. However, primarily these edicts focus more on social and moral precepts rather than the religious practices of Buddhism during Aśhoka's reign. Although scholars conclude that, as these edicts say nothing about the philosophical aspects of Buddhism, Asoka had a simplistic and naive understanding of the Dhamma. This view does not take into account the fact that the purpose of these edicts was not to expound the truths of Buddhism, but to inform the people of Asoka's reforms and to encourage them to be more generous, kind and moral.

The inscriptions found in the eastern parts of Mauryan Empire are written using the **Brāhmī script** in Magadhi language. The language used in the edicts found in the eastern part of India is common practices, a type of Magadhi, probably the official language of Asokan Empire. Other languages are had also been used in the other parts of India. In Afghanistan, inscriptions are written in Aramaic and Greek script. While in the western parts of the empire, the script used is **Kharoshti**, written in Prakrit. To add to the variety, one extract in the edict XIII is written in Greek and Aramaic. The world came to know of these details of the inscriptions of Mauryan Empire and Aśokan period when British Archaeologist James Prinsep decoded the edicts and inscriptions.

Since 1929, fourteen rock edicts of Ashoka were discovered in series and two as separate¹⁰. It concerns about the policy of people towards their slaves, social religious practices, and address to provide care for man and animals. Minor Rock Edicts, these are inscribed on 15 rocks found across India. Minor rock edicts have been found at various locations. It is interesting to note here that Aśoka has used his name only at four places. These four minor rock edicts are found at Maski in Karnataka, Brahmagiri in Karnataka, Gujara in Madhya Pradesh and Nettur in Andhra Pradesh. Pillar Edicts, The pillars edicts use two types of stones. One type is spotted white sandstone sourced from Mathura. Another type is buff colored sandstone and quartzite sourced from Amravati. Total 11 pillars have been found in India and Nepal. These are found at Topra (Delhi), Meerut, Kausambhi, Rampurva, Champaran, Mehrauli, Sanchi, Sarnath, Rummindei and Nigalisagar. All of these pillars are monolithic (made from single rock).

Engraving style of the script: Here we will discuss about early phase of the Brāhmī inscriptions, which are engraved on rocks, pillars and caves, while one is the carved on stone slab.¹¹ We have many inscriptions such as Rummindei, Nigali Sagar, Sarnath pillar edict, Delhi-topra and Girnar rock edict. Nevertheless, the fact that the engraving style is differs from hand to hand. Absorbingly variance may occur even through the material on which the record is engraved¹². We can observe the variance in carving hands in almost all of the inscriptions. We find the nine forms of a, four different form of ra, six types of ja in the rock edict of Girnar. In the Girnar rock, edict total 35 characters have been used in a little bit different style¹³. Among them 6 vowels(a, ā, i, u, e, o) and Anuswāra, 23 consonant (k, kha, ga, gha, ch, cha, ja, jha, ta, th, da, dha, na,ta,tha, da, dha, na, pa, pha, ba, bha, ma) 4 semi vowel (ya, ra, la, wa) and 2 aspirate (sa and ha) have been included¹⁴. Here, it is remarkable that Asoka's records have never used ña.

Uses of Strook (Mātrā): In the Ashokan inscriptions, all the medial vowels signs expressed by single or double vertical/ horizontal/ diagonal lines, at either right or left corner, at the top or the middle wherever it appear, at the bottom of the characters. These are:



Girnar rock edict provides sufficient palaeographic materials for study. In the Girnar rock edict, all the main vowels characters have been used e. i. ā, ī, ū, e, ai, o as



Au, vowel is disappeared in this record since the language of this rock edict is Prakrit. It was the local language of the ancient people where some alphabets found omitted such Ou, s, ś, ñ, ri, la, Iri etc. There was very simple technique of using vowel sign (Matara) in the consonant¹⁵. Medial a is expressed by a short horizontal bar added to the right of the letter, either at the top or in the middle. However in alphabate ja, tha, ma it is used in the middle of the character e.i. to the letter ja the sign has been added sometimes to the middle and sometimes at the top as.. the medial vowel I is expressed by a horizontal bar having a vertical stroke upper in the right end . By writing in the same dimension, the shape of the body becomes round . There are some other forms upper in alphabate hi, ti, dhi, wi, etc., in which medial I is shown in the middle of the letters. In ja and wa alphabate it located at the upper right side.



Medial I, has been derived from the sign ī by adding another vertical stroke, which indicate the vowel is for long - . According to the Prof. Ojha¹⁶, the sign for long ī was written in a different style in the Brāhmī inscriptions. The angular shape is everywhere, whereas long I, the cursive one is frequently seen in rock edict Girnar. Medial vowel U is denote by adding a vertical or horizontal, whenever diagonal line to the bottom of the letters. The initial form of the letters u put below the consonant na, pa, ma, wa, sa, and ha etc, it shows vertical and ga, ta, dha, bha, and ra used horizontal and diagonal. Long U have been used as double vertical line in the bottom of the characters. This can be seen as:



In the Ashoken inscriptions long u is not appeared very frequently. ē vowel is always located in the left of the letter, as a small horizontal dash. These are displayed as:



In the ai vowel expressed by attaching an additional horizontal stroke parallel to the sign of E, i.e.. It is very rare in the ashokan inscriptions.



Anusvāra & Anunasika: In the Ashokan inscriptions, Anusvara is expressed by a dot placed to the right side of the letter a¹⁷. These are-



In the early phase of Brāhmī, the formation of dot is similar in all characters.¹⁸ Gradually in the middle period of Brāhmī phase, we have seen varied form of dot, but it is always placed on the top of the letter. We find three additional varieties of dot as semi circle, horizontal curve and square dot. In the developed phase of Brāhmī, we can notice the change in the formation of the dot. It was placed above the letter or sometimes at the right

of the letter.¹⁹ The letter rehearse became vouge stillyfrom the 8th century onwards. In the later centuries, the Anusvara was found either in the form of a circle or a simple dot, which is always placed above the letters.²⁰ Anunasika is disappeared in the early phases of Brāhmī. However, in the middle Brāhmī age, it is appeared in the similar manner as crescent sign having an anusvara in the middle and placed above the letter.²¹

Conjuncts are normally placed one upon another in their natural order. The second letter becomes more shortend compretively upper. Here we can notice that two consonant had been conjecks for the gullaters . In the Ashoken inscriptions, there is both the letters shown in order to accommodate in the limited space, e.g.

Sva-  Vya-  Bhya-  Khya-  Mya- 

Sometimes, the lower letters becomes very small in shape or it is represented in a mutilated form e.g.

Yav-  Kya-  Hva- 

Dr. Upasak²² state d about some of these words in his study as “It is also interesting to note that this kind of confusion is still present in the spellings of some Hindi words, particularly with mha and lha, where one letter may be put after another and the vice verse.”²³ In the Ashokan inscriptions, writing of gullaters also depended on the pronunciations, such as first pronounced letters became full letter, however the second one denote small in shape. Although in present Indian scripts, the expression of conjuncts becomes back and forth. In this period, ra alphabet has been used as first letter or upper side of the letter; it is pronounced either first or second²⁴. Every ra alphabet's shape is

spiral, if it is locate at lower or upper²⁵  but in bra , ba becomes little spiral from the left arm.²⁶ da is exceptional of the gullaters . In the Giranar inscription, one placed Tp write as Pt²⁷. In sva , sa wrote in upper and the va is locate in the lower small character:

e.g. 

Besides alphabets, we also find some numerals in the maurayan inscriptions. There are only four numerals found in the Ashoken inscriptions, as 4, 6, 50, 200²⁸. Dr C.S.Upasak, T.P.Verma and other scholars have also assumed that these are numeral signs in the ashoken inscriptions. The sign four occuredonly once in the rock edict of Kalsi- XIII-7²⁹. It appears as simple cross like ka- . According to G.H.Ojha³⁰, it is the simple ka and it represented the only sign for 4 in the Ashoken inscriptions. Other numerals sigh six , fifty, and two hundred occored in the minor rock edict at Rupnath, Sahasram, Brahmagiri, Jating Rmeshwaram, Siddhapur, etc.³¹.

The number sign six looks very artistic in shape ja with open knot and cursive style, as , .

Other forms of this numaeral is also found in the other inscriptions as , , .

The numeral sign fifty occurs in the opposite shape pa,  sometimes in revers form . George Buehler has also pointed out that it is found in Rupnath inscriptions as

C. The sign of 200 is thus-  and is found in the Ashokan inscriptions. In the Sahasram, it appears as  this shape. Third shape also appears in Rupnath, Brahmahiri, Jating Rameshwar, Erragudi³² and Rajula Mandgiri as ,  .

Concludingly, all due say that Brāhmī alphabet contains indubitable and independent symbols for almost all pronounced souls, and they are combination of vowels with consonants. On the above characteristics of the Brāhmī alphabet could not possibly be derived from the Semitic alphabets³³. It has several characters form sound. Therefore, on these busily of all consideration of various factors the evolution of an alphabet clearly indicates that the indigenous origin of Brāhmī, and Bammi characters were invented by the guise of the Indian people. The Brāhmī as many pictographs, ideographs and phonetic signs whose introductory evidence is Indus Valley scripts.

References

- 1 Morshall, John., *Mohenjodaro and the Indus civilization*, Vol. I and II seen, table no. I.
- 2 Sharma, R. S., *Brāhmī Script in the development of North-western India and central India*, New Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 2002, pp. 13-21
- 3 Pandey, Rajbali, *Indian Paleography*, Varanasi: Motilal Baranasi Das, 1957, Pp. 30-31
- 4 Gupta, S. P., and Ramachandra, *The origin of Brāhmī Script*, Delhi: D. K. Publication, 1979, Pp. XIII-XIV
- 5 Niharika, *Prāchin Brārtiye Purāttva, Abhilekha awm Mudraye, Vishwavidhayalaya Prakashana*, Varanasi, 2004, pp. 138-139.
- 6 Gupta, S. P, *Ibid* , p. XIII- XIV.
- 7 *Ibid*
- 8 Verma T. P., *Development of Imperial Gupta Brāhmī script*, New Delhi: Ramanand Vidya Bhawan, 1998, pp. 1-3
- 9 *Ibid*
- 10 *Archaeological serve of India (A.R.)*, 1928-1929, p.114
- 11 Upasak, C. S., *History and Palaeography of Mauryan Brahmi Script*, Patna: Nav Nalanda Vihar, 1960, pp. 25-6
- 12 *Ibid*
- 13 Verma, Thakur Prasad(Ed), *Brāhmi Lipi Kā udhava aur vikash*, New Delhi: Ramanand vidhya Bhawan,1998,pp.44-5
- 14 *Ibid*, P. 45
- 15 Dani, A.H., *Indian palaeography*, P. 32
- 16 Ojha, *Prachinalipimala*, p. 103-9
- 17 Sharma, Ram, *Ibid*, p 241
- 18 Sharma, *Ibid*, p. 242
- 19 *Ibid*
- 20 Upashak, *Ibid*, P. 117-118
- 21 *Ibid*
- 22 Upasak, *Ibid*, p 119
- 23 Verma, *Ibid*, pp.48-49
- 24 *Ibid*

- ²⁵ Sharma, P. 49
²⁶ *Ibid*
²⁷ *Ibid*
²⁸ Upasak, *Ibid*, pp. 122-123
²⁹ *Ibid*
³⁰ Ojha, *Prachinalipimala*, p. 104
³¹ Ojha, Plate LXXIII
³² Cunningham, *Inscriptions of Ashoka*, Plate-XIV
³³ Diringer, *The alphabet*, pp. 328-334.