

An Essay on the History and Underlying Semantic Philosophy of Indian Alphabets. Orality and Literacy in Indian Philosophy

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"The origin of the Brahmi script (is) a mystery and its similarity with the Indus script"

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A Reminder on the History of Writing in India: Contentions and Interrogations.

Most scholars agree that the origins of the *Brahmi lipi* (script) and its kindred alphasyllabary, Kharosthi, are mysterious. The first inscriptions in Brahmi in Northern India are dated to the 3rd century BC rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka although earlier ones in the *Damilli* or *Dravidalipi* variant have been found in Sri Lanka and South India, dated as far back as 490-450 BC at Porunthal and perhaps one century earlier at Adichanallur, supporting Allchin's thesis that the Brahmi script is the result of a mostly indigenous evolution.

The prevalent theory however, first presented by Weber and Buhler in the 19th century, is that it is derived from the Syro-Phoenician alphabet through its "Imperial" Aramaic affiliate but that it was adapted to the Indian Prakrit languages, possibly by Brahmin scribes, to whom it owes its name, through the addition of characters rendering the range of sounds used in those languages from the original 22 to over 40. Brahmi and Kharosthi are both *abugidas* (i.e. languages which combine vowels and consonants in syllabic glyphs modified by the adjunction of specific signs).

It is generally believed that the Aramaic script was brought to North Western India by the Achaemenid Persian rulers who annexed it to their empire in the late 6th century BCE (Darius I's Behistun rock inscription of 519 BC mentions

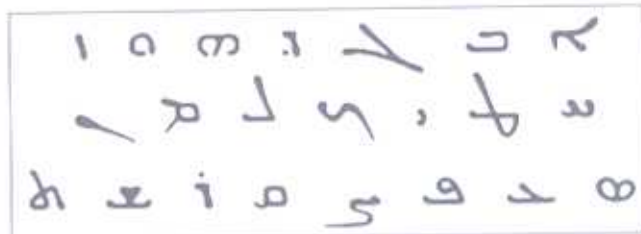


Chart 1. Aramaic script

Gandara (Gandhara, today's NW Pakistan and Afghanistan) as a province of his realm. Yet some connection have been detected between Brahmi and the "Indus Valley" seal signs which are at least three thousand years older. Furthermore one must be aware that Indian tradition alludes to "lost" or forgotten writing systems, one or more of which might have provided the missing link between the Indus Valley glyphs and Brahmi.

𐤀	𐤁	𐤂	𐤃	𐤄	𐤅	𐤆	𐤇	𐤈	𐤉	𐤊	𐤋
kāpē	yudh	lēth	bēth	zām	waw	hē	dāth	gāmal	bēth	alaph	
[k/x]	[j/i/e:]	[t']	[θ]	[z]	[w/o/u:]	[h]	[d/ð]	[g/y]	[b/v]	[ʔ/a:e:]	
𐤌	𐤍	𐤎	𐤏	𐤐	𐤑	𐤒	𐤓	𐤔	𐤕	𐤖	𐤗
lau	shin	rēsh	qōch	gāchō	pē	ō	semkath	run	mim	āmadh	
[l/v]	[ʃ]	[r]	[q]	[s']	[p/f]	[ʕ]	[s]	[n]	[m]	[l]	

Chart 2. Imperial Aramaic abjad.

It seems that during centuries if not millennia, sacred and cultural lore was conveyed and kept orally by its custodians and that ~~it~~ ~~was~~ rarely if at all consigned to writing. Sanskrit itself is found in Brahmi inscriptions only from the time of the Gupta Imperial dynasty around the 6th Century CE.

Together with Persian influence, the spread of Buddhism and Jainism, with their interest in recording teachings and stories linked to their founder and not part of the Vedic sacred Canon (*Sruti* and *Smriti*) may have accounted for the dissemination of writing. On the other hand scriptures (*sastras*), treatises (*prasthanas*) and commentaries (*bhasyas*)

Chart 3. Brahmi script

abound in Vedic and post-Vedic literature and some obviously predate the advent of Buddhism. Yet the theory that extensive prose works, such as Panini's famous *Astadhyayi*, – which quotes several earlier scholarly grammarians and philologists, in the 5th or 6th century BCE – were only consigned to memory for centuries before being written beggars belief even with the tested Indian practice of mastering a text by training a group of students to memorise specific verses each, just as actors learn to recite a play by heart. In fact it seems clear that technical treatises, colophons, lexicons, *scholia* and commentaries were composed in writing or at least compiled at the outset.

Panini who lived in Gandhara's capital of Puskalavati (today's Charsadda), near the already famed university of Takṣaśila (Taxila for the Greeks) cites both contemporary writing and scribes of his day and it is not proven that the latter used only "Persian" Aramaic characters, although he seemingly refers to *yavanani*, interpreted as "greek script" and his name itself, "son of Pani" is seen by some historians as a hint that he was of "Punic" origin, insofar as the Phoenicians were the *Panis* (merchants) of Vedic literature, which is alleged but not proven.

The Phoenicians claimed to have originated near the mouth of the Red Sea in Eastern Arabia or beyond.

Writing probably consisted originally of using graphic signs or glyphs as mnemonic devices and the Tantric mystico-magical tradition for one preserved that method of notation for many centuries.

The secrecy associated with the writing craft may account for the fact that Megasthenes, between the 4th and 3rd centuries BC Seleucid Ambassador to the Maurya court of Magadha thought that Indians did not know of any writing. If so the Buddhists may have popularized a skill hitherto jealously treasured by Brahmin scribes.

Another problem with assigning the paternity of Brahmi to the West Asian Syro-Phoenician family of alphabets is that there is a missing intermediary link between the Aramaic "semitic" alphabet and the fully formed Brahmi of the Mauryan rock edicts as we have already pointed out. It would seem more probable that the latter was partly derived from an earlier, now forgotten writing system and partly modified under Aramaic "Persian" influence. Such an indigenous origin would also explain better why both Brahmi and Kharosthi adopted the left to right sequence typical of Indo-European alphabets as opposed to the right to left order inherited by semitic *abjads*, including Aramaic from the Sinaitic and Ugarit scripts.

While the Kharosthi *Gandhari arapacana* script is held to be a forebear of Turkic Runic letters (appearing from 8th C. CE), of the Mongol characters as also of the Pahlevi, Mandaean, Sogdian and Manichean Iranian alphabets (2nd to 7th C CE), the Brahmi script evolved into the Gupta Imperial standard alphasyllabary, also known as "late Brahmi" from the 4th century CE. The latter begat the various Prakrit writing systems, many of which are still in use in the diverse regions of the subcontinent.

In South India, seemingly eclipsing *Dravidalipi* under the influence of the Sanskritised courts of the Tamil and Malabar countries, it gave rise in the 6th C CE to the *Grantha* box characters of the Pallava Kingdom, on the Bay of Bengal, and later the *Kadamba* and *Vattelatu* scripts which in turn were adopted with modifications by the Southeast Asian cultures decisively shaped by Indian settlers and teachers at least two thousand years ago if not sooner.

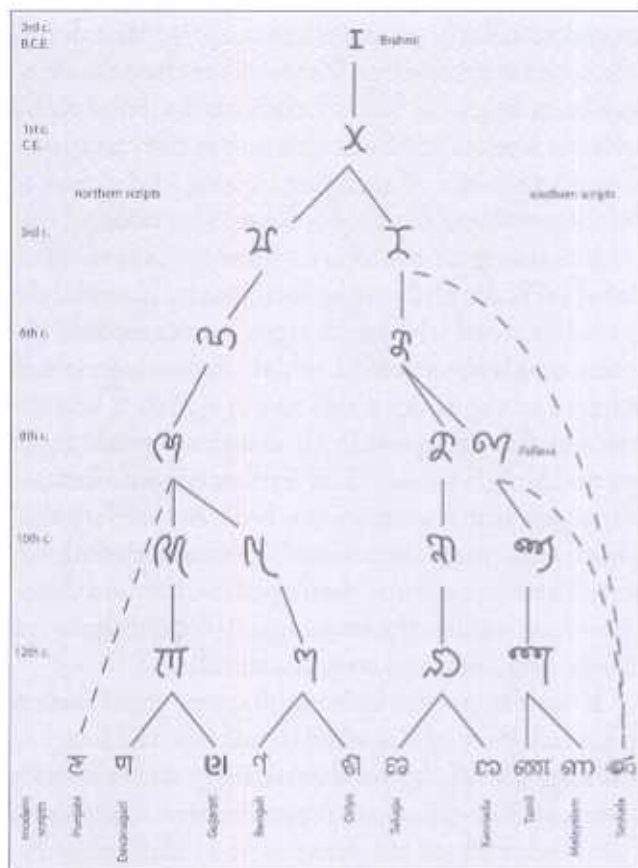


Chart 5. Indian Scripts (Northern and Southern)

Earliest among the "Indic" writing systems of Indochina and Indonesia are the Champa script of South Vietnam and the Sumatran and Javanese ones, followed by the Mon and Khmer characters. Several dozen related alphabets, used by over a billion and a half people, from Western India to Cambodia form the extended family of Brahmi. In India itself, the three main offspring of the Gupta *Lipi* are the classical *Nagari* (i.e. urban or civilized) of tenth century AD, almost contemporary of the *Sarada* of medieval Kashmir and the much earlier *Siddham* (c. 500 CE), the main writing vehicle of Buddhist Tantric literature which inherited some of the Kharosthi symbolic conventions used for esoteric Mahayana teachings since the time of the Kushan dynasty.

The Tibetan alphabet in its *dbucan* (hieratic) and *dbumed* (cursive) forms, was adapted from the Gupta Imperial Brahmi by Thonmi Sambhota who had been sent to Kashmir for that purpose by King Songtsen Gampo in the first half of the 7th century CE. It in turn was borrowed and adapted by other Himalayan peoples such as the Lepchas and the

Mongol Buddhists for their own *Phags pa* alphabet which was in use at the court of Genghis Khan and his imperial successors.

The history of the spread of the Brahmi-Kharosthi type of alphasyllabaries across Asia seems to recapitulate the even more complex and controversial expansion of the so-called "Indo-European" (presumably unwritten) languages in the same geographic space thousands of years earlier, out of the "Proto-Indo-European (PIE) matrix". In both cases, the prevalent albeit disputed theories postulate the development of many offshoots out of an archetype located somewhere in Eurasia (PIE) and in West Asia (Sinaitic-Ugaritic *abjad*) respectively, whether we follow the "Paleolithic Continuity" (Mario Alinei et al.), Anatolian (Colin Renfrew), "Nostratic" (Holger Pedersen et al.), "Eurasianic" (J. Greenberg) or "Out of India" (Elst and Kazanas) versions with regard to the oral languages whose *urheimat* in the 18th century the founder of linguistics Friedrich Schlegel located firmly in South Asia.

In both cases, the South Asian subcontinent has strong claims to be seen if not as the original "homeland", at least as the major crucible for the evolution of the languages and writing systems practiced in that very extended family, spread from Iceland and Portugal to the Malay archipelago.

Indian Philosophies and the Hermeneutics of Language and Writing

The dichotomy between orality and literature in India may be linked with the duality postulated by what is perhaps India's seminal philosophical and epistemological system, the *Sankhya*. *Sankhya* describes reality as the interplay of two principles: *purusa*, the "male" intellective or directive principle and *prakriti*: nature, inanimate but energy-filled matter. The permeation of *Prakriti* by *Purusa* accounts for the "orderly chaos" of Creation. Similarly *Prakriti*, the "natural" or spontaneous language is ordered by the higher culture of *Sanskrit*: the verb or vehicle of *Purusa* which refines and improves it to forge the "language of the gods".

If language is an expression of the mind, writing is an impression on a two dimensional surface. It effects the transition from one sense to another: as action, it is the result of a transfer from the mouth

to the hand and, as perception it shifts from hearing to seeing. If a syllabic sound (*aksara*) manifests an energy drawn out of potential-filled silence, a letter or a written word is a seal that evokes that sound and encapsulates it as if it were a seed (*bija*) of it.

The great master of the *vyakarana* school of linguistic, Bhartrhari theorized about the *sphota*, the spontaneous mental impulse which gives rise to sound (*dhvani*) as a letter or a word. In his view, language is the expression of a universal, eternal sonic vibration (*nada*) even though its vocalization and the hearer's audition introduce variations and often, a loss of the initial, pristine sound which may be purely mental and not physically audible. However that notion of semantic holism was disputed and rejected by the grammarians and logicians of the *mimansa* and *nyaya* tradition who saw language, whether spoken or written as a series of "atomic" sounds whose alignment in a particular sequential order gradually produced meaning as a whole that is however more than the mere arithmetic sum of its parts.

The graphic sign, which is a mere form (*rupa*) of a name (*nama*), – just as a shape or a living form contains some elusive and undefined matter – can change, as it is part of impermanent and unessential *Maya-Samsara* and it is thus that throughout history, many different writing systems have been used in India. Sanskrit itself was written in so many regional scripts until European colonisation brought the printing press which eventually led to a standardization of Sanskrit texts into the already mentioned one thousand years old *nagari* or *devanagari* alphasyllabary.

A text (*sutra*: thread, also the meaning of *Ch'ing* in Chinese) is therefore, as the etymology shows, a fabric woven out of letters (*rupa*) emanating from formless, invisible language (*śabda*) as a textile fabric is woven out of fiber (cotton or silk) or a musical theme (*raga*) is made of *svaras* (notes). A random drawing acquires life and meaning when it is invested by the "verb" of Purusa with the power of *buddhi*: the intellectual factor that comes to dwell in it (*antaryamin*).

In English we say that we draw water from a well, just as we draw a picture, or a word, to project a meaning. However, like all Prakriti which is ever-changing, inherently unconscious and thus illusory

or rather delusory, the letters must be abandoned when the transcendent essence that they allude to has been reached, like a boat may be left behind when a stream has been crossed as they are mere waves in the sea of meaning or rays of the Sun of intelligence that have no independent reality.

According to the *Nyaya-Vaisesika* school (*daršana*) of Vedic philosophy founded by Kanada, the sound or word (the greek *logos*) is a cause and the letter or glyph an effect which is contingent and relative to the society and age in which it was devised and is being used. All things are made up of atoms though God is their first cause and likewise, all words and discourses are built out of "atomic" phonemes, morphemes and, (when written) letters. The hermeneutic duality of orality and scripture thus parallels the ontological parallels between divine causation and atomic creation.

If we follow the epistemology of the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* tradition of Vaisnava Hinduism, the letter itself might be understood by analogy with the body (*sarira*) while the sound expressed by it is the *sariri* (soul) with which it forms the *jiva* (lifeform or being), itself a reflection (*pratibimba*) of the cosmic Divine (*aksarabrahman*: the eternal sound sung as *Aum*).

In the Indian philosophical worldview, a letter is an interchangeable variable, as the physical body is for an individual self or soul and therefore an infinite number of systems can be devised and utilized to transcribe the words that have been conveyed and memorised. Sound is imperishable and sacred whereas the scriptural sign is only a code whose holiness derives from the sound assigned to it and of which it becomes a symbol (*pratika*) or a metaphor (*paroksa*). Such a perspective might account for the apparent fact that, as we have pointed out, for more than twelve centuries no writing system is known to have been in use in India, perhaps because it was not held to be necessary in a civilization which is based on the Verb and not on a book. As Saint Paul says in Corinthians 2, 3:6: "The letter kills but the Spirit gives life".

Biology and Language: Parallel tracks?

As a creation of both the mind and the hand, a writing system is a by-product of biology and seeking parallels between biology, linguistics and writ-

ing systems yields very interesting reflections and realizations. If we notice the similarity between the syllable and the DNA molecule, the letters that compose the former (often combined in ligatures) might be compared to the amino-acids that make up the latter whereas words are combinations of syllables and living beings are like more or less lengthy and complex sentences or verses (*slokas*) built out of "chromosomic" words. The well known analogy between the alphabet and DNA's four component "letters": ACGT – or "acagata", according to Indic writing systems – comforts us in this speculation. An additional connection is provided by the DNA's relation with sonic vibrations, bringing to mind the word's essentially sonorous nature (*nada, sabda*) which writing merely notes or indicates as an "impression" of a particular "expression".

Another, often made parallel applies to consonants and vowels, respectively equated with matter and spirit. In the Brahmi alphasyllabary and all related ones, all letters are syllables but consonants are in their initial form spelt with the initial "a" sound added which is then modified through specific diacritical signs when a different vowel is brought in to modulate the syllable in the manner in which mind moves matter (*mens agitat molem*) by "breathing in it" or pervading it.

The Indian writing systems are *varnamalas* (garlands of letters) arranged in a specific phonetically determined order (*varga*) which goes from the guttural to the labio-guttural through palatal, labial, retroflex, dental and palato-guttural inflexions. The Japanese *kana* alphabet adopted the Brahmi *varga* order though the sounds it enshrines are different.

It should be noted that like, many if not all ancient languages and writing systems, both Brahmi and Kharosthi assigned numerical correspondences to all the syllables letter signs through a method called *katapayadi sankhya* so that words enshrine numbers that lend them a hidden or esoteric meaning. It is customary for mathematical axioms, formulas and equations to be recorded in verses that are also ciphers for those scientific data though they have outward mundane or religious meanings for the uninitiated.

Keeping this in mind, one understands better why the Vedic tradition recognizes two main classes of masters (*gurus*): those who have heard: *Sro-*

triyā (direct knowledge acquired through divine inspiration) and those who remember (the verbal teachings and its esoteric instructions): *Smarta*, whence comes the English word: smart.

Conclusion

There is no certainty about the "original" alphabetic writing system though the most popular and best supported theory is that it was devised by the Syro-Phoenicians and subsequently modified and used by many other civilizations, including "Indo-European" ones that had earlier used Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform characters or, probably the still enigmatic "Indus Valley" signs.

Aramaic, a "lingua franca" used by the Achaemenid "great kings" for communication across their vast and diverse empire, seems to have brought the Phoenician-Chaldean *abjad* into Central Asia and India at least from the VIth century BCE. There it was adapted to design the indigenous Brahmi and Kharosthi *abugidas*, patronized by the mighty Taksilan, Nanda, Maurya, Kushan and Gupta dynasties, which in turn gave rise to a vast number of derivative alphasyllabaries used in most of East and Northern Asia until today, from the Turkic runes to the various Indochinese characters.

In Central and South East Asia many cultures gradually replaced those Brahmi-derived scripts with Arabic or Chinese writing systems when they fell under the sway of Islam or were vassalised by China. In India around the 10th century of the Common Era, Brahmi and its Prakrit variants evolved into Devanagari, the most complete, systematic and scientific (but also hieratic) form of Indic writing, through a process comparable to that by which the Naskh cursive Arabic script was shaped into the monumental Kufic alphabet. The national language of India, Hindi, is written in Devanagari but not all the factors that contributed to the birth of this holy geometric script are known although the metaphysical and cosmological principles which guided the design of the letters reflect the essence of Indian mathematical philosophy.

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All charts are taken from the Wikipedia Articles on Aramaic, Brahmi, Kharosthi and Indian scripts.