

WRITING IN INDIA

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Early

Indus Valley The writing system (of 417 separate symbols) recorded on Indus Valley seals from about 2500-1900 BCE is yet to be deciphered. Early research claimed that it was a precursor of the Brahmi script (see below), but this now seems unlikely. Other scholars believe that the underlying language is Dravidian, but this, too, is unproven. A recent book argues that there is no underlying language and that the symbols are merely a code for financial transactions. All we can say with certainty is that the corpus consists of about 4,000 inscriptions, the longest with 17 symbols and the shortest with five. There is also a consensus that the writing should be read from left to right.

Brahmi All known and deciphered Indian scripts derive from Brahmi, itself probably derived from a Sumerian script. The earliest Brahmi inscriptions, recorded in the Prakrit-language stone edicts of Ashoka, were produced in the 3rd century BCE. Brahmi inscriptions are also plentiful in south India during the period from about 200 BCE to 200 CE. Over time, the Brahmi script proved ideally suited for the sound systems of Indo-Aryan languages and, with some modifications, for Dravidian languages. Following Brahmi, all indigenous Indian scripts are written horizontally and from left to right

Kharosthi Some inscriptions from this early period in the northwest (in what is now Pakistan) were written in the Kharosthi script. The origins of this script are still debated—many scholars believe that its right-to-left direction indicates a semitic source—but its demise in the 3rd c. CE is not in doubt.

Materials Writing on stone dates from the 3rd c. BCE. Copper plates were inscribed as early as the 4th c. CE, and writing on birch bark dates from the Gupta Empire (4th-6th c. CE). The earliest surviving palm-leaf manuscript is dated to the 9th c. CE, but that perishable material probably was used long before. Paper and paper manufacture were introduced to India from the Islamic world by 1300 CE. Cloth and animal skin were also used in the medieval period. The convention of writing on paper with pen or pencil began only in the mid-19th century.

Later

North India In north India, the Brahmi script evolved into the Gupta script (used largely on coins and for inscriptions), which later became the Nagari script, first used about 800 CE. Nagari then branched off into the various north Indian scripts used today, such as Devanagari, Gujarati, Oriya and Gurmukhi. Merchants in Gujarat developed their own, free-running script for commercial transactions, and Sikhs in the Punjab created Gurmukhi to write their scriptures.

South India From about 500 CE, south Indians modified Brahmi to develop a more angular script (*grantha*) for writing Sanskrit. At the same time, Tamils created another script (*vatteluttu*) which they used for Tamil. *Vatteluttu* ('round letters') was then adapted to other Dravidian languages to create three more scripts. These somewhat circular scripts were probably influenced by the need to write on soft palm-leaf.

Perso-Arabic Persian written in the cursive Perso-Arabic script became the court language in north India from about 1000 CE and continued to grow in status under the Mughals. Although its shorthand notation for vowels makes the Perso-Arabic script less well-suited than Brahmi to record Indian languages, the prestige of Persian and the script's calligraphic aesthetic ensured its place in north Indian culture.

Roman The Roman script was introduced with the arrival of the Europeans from about 1500 CE onward and was used on occasion to write Indian languages, especially in early printed books. More recently, since the early 20th century, Roman has been preferred (as a 'neutral' alternative) to indigenous scripts when recording tribal languages.

Controversy As the Mughal Empire and the Persian language declined, the language of Urdu (also written in Perso-Arabic) emerged as the prime vehicle for Indo-Persian literature. By the middle of the 19th century, Urdu had replaced Persian as the administrative and legal language of British India. This meant that Hindi, in the Nagari script, was side-lined. However, Urdu and Hindi are essentially the same languages. In other words, there was 'one language but two scripts.' Soon Hindi-speaking Hindus asserted their voice in nationalist politics and demanded that Hindi in the Nagari script should replace Urdu in the Perso-Arabic script. The issue was only resolved with the creation of Pakistan and India in 1947.

Tribe

Unscripted Tribal languages (exceptions noted below) lack their own writing system and are written in one of the dominant scripts in their area, for example, Hindi, Bengali or Tamil. Some populations prefer English because it is seen as a 'neutral' choice. In effect, tribal languages are 'unscripted.' Lacking a script in a highly literate and heavily scripted culture, such as India, is a mark of inferiority.

Lost Scripts It is thus not surprising that many tribal groups have stories that explain how they once had but then 'lost' their script. Several tribes have also attempted to invent a new script or retrieve a 'lost' script, usually a form of Nagari or Roman. But these experiments in self-appointed literacy have failed. Only two of the roughly 100 documented tribal languages (Santali and Ho) have scripts that are used in any practical sense.

Politics The political weakness of tribal languages is also apparent. In the 1950s new states were established on the basis of language, but recent new states (Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand) have been organised on the basis of tribal ethnicity. Current demands for the future states of Bodoland and Gorkhaland also focus on ethnicity rather than language. A tribal language, even when elevated to a state official language, appears to lack the political power of a regional language.

Reading

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Discussion questions

Analyse the significance of the Indus Valley script. Assess the credibility of the main theories of its origin, its function and its underlying language. Why has decipherment eluded so many scholars and what would it mean for the understanding of Indian culture if the script were finally deciphered?

Research the controversy known as 'one language, two scripts.' What is the history of the Nagari and Perso-Arabic scripts in India? Why did the controversy flare up in the nineteenth century and what is the status of the dispute today?

Analyse the politics of writing in India with reference to tribal languages. What is the significance of the stories of a 'lost' script? What invented or recovered scripts are currently in use, and why have so many others failed?

A gap of more than fifteen hundred years separates the last phase of Indus Valley writing from the first inscription in a known Indian language in the 3rd c. BCE. How can one account for this millennium and a half of illiteracy? What does it reveal about Indian history? What is the significance of the first inscriptions in the 3rd c. BCE? What was their content and purpose?