

# HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## INDIAN CULTURE- Writing

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### Overview

India's writing systems, like its languages, are both diverse and a potent marker of cultural identity. Researchers have identified over 50 different scripts in use now or in the past. The most commonly used scripts today are those adapted for writing the major regional languages, such as Hindi, Bengali or Telugu. This multiplicity of separate (though related) writing systems within a single country is unique. Historically, the very first script in the subcontinent was the still undeciphered Indus Valley script dated to 2500-2000 BCE. However, all modern Indian scripts derive from the Brahmi script, which itself was probably derived from a Sumerian script and was first used for writing stone inscriptions in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE. Many tribal groups who lack a script have invented or recovered their own distinct writing system through which they attempt to assert their identity.

### Indus Valley

The earliest known writing system in the subcontinent is the script used by the people of the Indus Valley civilisation in the third millennium BCE. This script, which may derive from Akkadian cuneiform, ceased to be used after the Indus cities declined and today remains one of the greatest mysteries of the ancient world. The small steatite (soapstone) seals are inscribed with a system of as yet undeciphered signs. Unlike other undeciphered scripts, the Indus presents a double problem in that both its writing and its underlying language remain unknown. Another problem facing an epigraphist wishing to solve this puzzle is that the number of inscribed stones is relatively small (4,500) and the average inscription is short (about 5 signs). In fact, specialists have not yet reached a consensus on the number of discreet signs in the script, with estimates ranging from about 200 to 500. Nevertheless, intense research has been carried out for more than a century, including recent computerised analyses. Some scholars contend that the underlying language must be a form of Indo-Aryan, while others argue that it is probably proto-Dravidian. Still others maintain that there is no underlying language at all, that the signs are a form of bookkeeping for recording transactions, such 'A sold 12 sheep to B.'

### Brahmi

More than fifteen centuries after the demise of the Indus script, during which time no examples of writing have been identified, the Brahmi script appeared. Although its origins continue to be debated, most scholars believe it is derived from a Semitic script (probably Aramaic). Others contend that it evolved from the Indus script, but this argument is weakened by the fact that the Indus was written from right to left, while Brahmi, like most modern Indian scripts, is written from left to right. Brahmi was used in India from approximately 500 BCE to 400 CE, although its most famous examples are the stone inscriptions, or imperial edicts, by King Asoka (3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE). Some of those inscriptions were written not in Brahmi, but in Kharosthi, which continued in use until about 200 CE in northwest India. Over time, Brahmi proved more adaptable to Indian languages and developed several regional variants, which themselves then evolved into the scripts used for writing modern Indian languages. It should be noted that Brahmi was also adapted to write numbers, which are used across the world today; they are called 'Arabic' numerals because they came to the west through Muslim scholars studying ancient Indian texts.

### Modern scripts

With one exception, all scripts used for writing major languages in India are derived from Brahmi. That exception is Urdu, which uses a Perso-arabic script. All these scripts are 'abugida', which means that they display vowel-consonant sequences as a single unit, usually a vowel embedded in a dominant consonant or a vowel represented by a diacritic mark. Non-abugida scripts provide only separate representations for vowels and consonants. These modern Indian scripts, like languages, divide into two broad geographical groups: the Nagari/devanagari scripts in the north and the Dravidian scripts in the south. Some of key epigraphical differences between the northern and southern scripts are explained by the fact that the latter were used to write on palm leaves and therefore developed more rounded as opposed to angular marks.

The Nagari scripts include separate writing systems for Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Panjabi, Oriya and Bengali. Each of the four major southern languages—Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam—uses a separate but related script.

### Identity

The best example of cultural identity inscribed in scripts is the so-called ‘one language/two scripts’ controversy. Urdu and Hindi are essentially one language (with only superficial differences in vocabulary), but they are written in two very different scripts that reflect their religious background and contemporary identity. Hindi is written in the Nagari script, which connects it to Sanskrit, while Urdu is written in a Perso-Arabic script, which links it to Islam. This issue became politically charged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Hindi-speakers began to demand that Hindi in the Nagari script become the language of nationalism. At that time, Hindi was considered an unrefined tongue, second in status to Urdu, which had been patronised by the late Mughal emperors. In 1900, the British government issued a proclamation granting equal status to Hindi, which was seen as a victory for Hindus. The issue was only finalised resolved in 1947 with the creation of Pakistan, where Urdu is the official language, and India, where Hindi has been declared the official language. Similarly, religious identity is asserted by Sikhs who write their scriptures in a special script (Gurumukhi).

### Tribal scripts

Most of the approximately 500 tribal languages in India are written in a modern Indian script used by a nearby language (such as Bengali, Tamil, etc.). However, many tribes have opposed this literal ‘cover-up’ of their language and have chosen to write in either roman script (seen as more politically neutral than a dominant Indian script) or have devised their own script. In other words, writing in one’s own script is an assertion of cultural identity. For example, the Khampis, Membos, Singphos and Monpas in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh have adapted Burmese and Tibetan scripts. Other tribes have ‘invented’ their own scripts. The best known example is Ol Chiki, created in the 1920s by a leader of the Santals in eastern India and used today in local periodicals and schools; even computer fonts have been created for this Santali script. In other cases, tribes have ‘rediscovered’ supposedly ancient scripts. Lacking a script in a highly literate and heavily scripted culture, such as India, is a sure mark of inferiority. It is thus not surprising that nearly all tribal groups have stories that explain how they once had but then ‘lost’ their script.

### Discussion/Questions

1. Stories of a ‘lost’ script are not confined to tribal groups. Both the classical traditions of Sanskrit and Tamil have similar stories. The Vedas frequently get lost, and old Tamil poems have a bad habit of being washed away in a flood.
2. Why are scripts so important? One answer is that they are a visual representation of a language and thus a cultural marker that is easily disseminated in the public sphere. Researchers also point out that scripts are crucial to the long-term stability of a language. If you write a language in a script that does not accurately represent that language’s distinct sounds, you may eventually lose the ability to articulate those sounds.
3. The role of the Indus valley script remains unknown: it may have been used to record business transactions or to write more complex ideas. What we do know is that roughly 1500 years passed before writing was again appeared in India. Brahmi inscriptions date from approximately 500 BCE, but the most famous are those used to write the edicts of King Ashoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE. How can we explain this hiatus of more than a millennium in the history of writing in India? Did the knowledge of writing simply disappear? Did the technology vanish? Did the need for writing no longer exist?

## Reading

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K.S. Singh (ed.), *Tribal Movements in India* (Manohar, 1982)

Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Valley Script* (Cambridge, 2009)