

A Comparative Study of the Brāhmi Inscriptions of South Asia:

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The purpose of this article is to compare briefly the Brāhmi inscriptions of Asoka with those of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka with reference to their age, subject matter, format, language and palaeography. Of these, the inscriptions of Asoka are found in Northern India and in the South up to the Northern border of Tamil Nadu.

The art of writing has played a very significant role in the history of human civilization. South Asia has been familiar with the art of writing, since the dawn of civilization in the third millennium B. C. — the Indus Valley Civilization or the Harappa Culture, as it is called by some recent historians. Unfortunately, there is no unanimity among scholars regarding the decipherment of the script found in this civilization. Some scholars think that Brāhmi the most popular script of ancient South Asia and the source of all later scripts of this vast region has evolved from the script of the Indus Valley Civilization. While others held the view that it had been inspired by a script or scripts from West Asia.

Though ancient South Asia might have had several scripts, Brāhmi and its derivatives have dominated this region for nearly twenty five centuries, if not more. It is worth noting the remark of Mr. C. S. Upasak an authority on Brāhmi regarding this script "The Indian alphabet is a marvellous and magnificent phenomenon quite unrivalled in the world. No doubt the arrangement of letters which represent a symmetrical combination of symbols designed to indicate various shades of sound which grouped together is quite unique in the world". (Upasak, pp. 14-15). It was a simple system of writing, which could be studied, memorized and written easily. It could also be adopted easily to indicate new sounds in a language. Therefore, it is no wonder that it became very popular among the people of the major part of South Asia, when its use became widespread in the third century B. C., during the reign of the emperor Asoka, from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka. Asoka used this script mostly for the propagation of his Dharma in his dominions and outside. The use of this script has transcended all regional, linguistic, religious and other barriers.

After the decline and fall of the Indus Valley Civilization, the next phase of writing, as far as the extant records are concerned, is found in the inscriptions of the Mauryan emperor Asoka (3rd century B. C.). As he had brought nearly the whole of India except Assam and Tamil Nadu under his sway, the use of this script on a wider scale was made easier. Further, even Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka which were outside the orbit of his vast empire had become under the sphere of his influence. Therefore, the use of this script became widespread in these places too.

Age :

The inscriptions of Asoka were recorded mostly in the Brahmi script in his far-flung empire except in North West India and Afghanistan where Kharosthi script was used. As mentioned earlier, he reigned in the third century B. C. The earliest inscriptions of ancient Tamil Nadu (comprising the present day Tamil Nadu and major part of Kerala) and Sri Lanka also were inscribed in the Brahmi script as from the third century B. C. to a few centuries after the Christian Era. Most of the inscriptions of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka were later than those of Asoka. Further, one has to consider the Brahmi inscriptions inscribed on the potsherds found at Arikamedu and a few other sites in Tamil Nadu and at a few sites in Sri Lanka like Anuradhapura, Kantarodai and very recently in the Poonakari area of the Jaffna Peninsula in Sri Lanka. A potsherd inscription discovered recently at Anuradhapura is said to be much earlier than the third century B. C. It needs further corroboration and confirmation from other sources and has to be studied in detail. The inscriptions from Bhattirrolu in Southern Andhra Pradesh also date about third or second century B. C. These also could be taken along with those of Tamil Nadu for purposes of comparison.

Subject Matter:

The inscriptions of Asoka mostly proclaim the Dhamma (Dharma) that he propagated after the Kalinga war throughout his vast empire and in the neighbouring countries to the South (Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka) and to the West (West Asia, Egypt and South Eastern Europe). But there are a few inscriptions that show his inclination towards Buddhism. One of them - the Bhabru edict refers to his acceptance of the Triratna (triple gems - the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha) and another at Rummindei refers to the reduction of the tax to 1/8 in the birth place of the Buddha. The Barabar cave inscriptions refer to his donation of the caves to the Ajivika monks. Most of Asoka's inscriptions were inscribed on rocks, pillars and caves and one on a stone slab. Further the Dhamma of Asoka is common to all Indian religions and it is not exclusively Buddhist as assumed by several historians. Prof. A. L. Basham, Prof. Romila Thapar and a few other historians have clearly brought out this point.

The Brahmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu were mostly inscribed in the caves and to a less extent on the potsherds. The cave inscriptions are found in Southern Tamil Nadu. They refer to the donors of the caves mostly to the Jaina ascetics and to a lesser extent to the Buddhist monks and therefore they are not exclusively Buddhist as the Bhattiprolu casket inscriptions. The inscriptions on potsherds generally refer to the name of the donor or donee or owner of the vessels. The Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka are exclusively Buddhist and refer to the names of various pious donors to Buddhism, especially the Buddhist monks. Some of the potsherd inscriptions had the same purpose. Therefore, by way of comparison, it may be said that the inscriptions of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu share common ideals to some extent - donations

to Buddhist institutions or monks. The Sri Lankan Brāhmi Inscriptions are found in several parts of the Island. Four of the Brāhmi inscriptions discovered at Anuradhapura, Periyapuliyaṅkulam (in Northern Sri Lanka) and Dīghavapī (in the South Eastern part of Sri Lanka) throw a very important light on the history and antiquity of the Tamils in Sri Lanka (Paranavitana, pp. 7, 28, 37). They refer to the patronage of Tamils to Buddhism. Here the occurrence of the word Dameda (Tamil) is of great significance. Of these, the most important one referring to the householder at Anuradhapura (Paranavitana, p. 7) may be compared with the Tamil Brāhmi inscription from Tirupparankunram in Tamil Nadu. This refers to a donation of a cave by a householder from Sri Lanka (Īlattukkutumpikan) (Mayilai Sīni Venkatasamy, pp. 124-128). The use of the word Dameda (Tamil) to denote the Tamils is not found in any of the Tamil Brāhmi inscriptions or later inscriptions of Tamil Nadu for a long time. The word Tamil is found in the earliest stratum of Tamil literature—the Sangam Classics and in the Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka. But this is the first occurrence of the word in the inscriptions and therefore it is very significant. Another early reference to Tamil (Tiramida or Dravida) is found farther to the North of Tamil Nadu in Orissa in the Prakrit inscription of the Kalinga King Khāvela at Hāthigumpha (2nd or 1st century B. C.). Further, a recently discovered potsherd inscription from Paramankirai at Poonakari in Sri Lanka mentions the name Vel (வேல்) — a name quite familiar to the students of the Sangam Classics and history of ancient Tamil Nadu (P. Pushparatnam, pp. 8 - 9).

Format:

The Brāhmi inscriptions of Asoka number about fifty and are of moderate length, though a few of them like the Barabar cave inscriptions run to one or two lines. Most of the inscriptions begin with the formula “Devānampiya Piyadassi rājā (king) speaks thus...” This seems to have been inspired by the Achaemenian inscriptions of Persia which begin as “Thus said Darius...”. After the above formula, the Asokan edicts generally refer to the various aspects of Dhamma that he propagated. The format of the Barabar Cave inscriptions is generally similar to those of the cave inscriptions of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka where the name or names of the donors, donee and the donations are referred to. The Asokan edicts generally refer to his reign year when they were issued. The Brāhmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu number about eighty five, whereas those of Sri Lanka run about 1800 and most of the inscriptions of these two areas are very short and generally run to one or two or three lines.

Language:

Though, Asoka used two scripts Brāhmi and Kharoṣṭhī in India, he had used only one language — a Prakrit which was like a lingua franca of South Asia at this time. The Sri Lankan inscriptions too were written in a Prakrit

which formed the basis of the later Sinhala language. The Bhattiprolu casket inscriptions also were written in a Prakrit. But the language of the Brāhmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu was Tamil, though a few scholars tried to read them as a hybrid Prakrit. Now, there is no doubt that the language of these records is Tamil. But as these records were mostly of Jaina persuasion, there is some Prakrit influence on these. An important fact emerges when one compares the languages of these almost contemporary records of South Asia - that is, except in Tamil Nadu, in all other or rather most of the other areas of South Asia, Prakrit had been the language of inscriptions. But as Tamil had developed by this time and Tamil Nadu was ruled by Tamil rulers, the language had been rightly the language of the area. This shows that Tamil had developed very well a few centuries before Christ as pointed out by eminent Tamil scholars. The language of the potsherds recently discovered at the Poonakari area appears to have been Tamil as it is evident from the potsherd with the name *Vel* and others with the letters peculiar to Tamil, like *la(ṛ)*, *la(ṃ)*, *ra(ṃ)*, and *na(ṃ)*. They may be compared favourably with those of contemporary Tamil Nadu.

Palaeography:

There is a great uniformity in the Brāhmi letters found in the Asokan edicts, though some scholars speak of a "Northern" and "Southern" variety of Brāhmi in them. As C. S. Upasak puts it, 'Asokan Brāhmi in its general appearance is straight and angular, though a few letters are round in shape; cursiveness appears through out, but not abundantly. The height of the letters is usually equal and sometimes even in the conjuncts an equal height is maintained by making the second letter smaller in size. Regularly the lines go from left to right except in the minor Rock edict at Erragudi' (C. S. Upasak, p. 28). It is interesting to note that some sort of punctuation was used in the edicts of Asoka. Regarding the variances in the shape of letters, Upasak holds that "one particular shape of a letter is more common and artistic than the forms of the same letter which appear side by side. The shape which is more frequent was to be regarded as the standard one and other forms should be attributed to other factors" (C. S. Upasak, p. 29).

The Brāhmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka while sharing features in common with those of Asoka, have certain features peculiar to them also. Further, the Brāhmi inscriptions of Tamil Nadu bear closer affinities to the early inscriptions from Bhattiprolu in Andhra Pradesh and those from Sri Lanka. The Brāhmi inscriptions as found in the potsherds of Tamil Nadu and in some parts of Sri Lanka closely resemble one another and might suggest a common source of origin. It appears that Southern Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka shared some common traditions at this time and later for some centuries through commerce, as well as, Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. The importance of Buddhism in this context cannot be ignored, as it played a vital rôle in forging a sort of common bond among these areas.

Prof. S. Paranavitana the doyen of Sri Lankan epigraphists in his edition of Early Brahmi inscriptions, Vol. 1, has said that "The script in which the epigraphs included in section I of this volume are written, is on the whole, as that of the edicts of Asoka, of the records found in the railings and toranas of Bharhut and Sanchi and some of the early Prakrit inscriptions discovered in India" (Paranavitana, p. xiii). Thus, he has endorsed the traditional view that the Brahmi script of Sri Lanka is virtually a replica of the script found in the inscriptions of Asoka and those of a few centuries later in Northern India.

But a closer study of the Brahmi Script as found in the inscriptions at Bhattiprolu, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka reveals an interesting fact that the script of all these three have some common features and at the same time some innovations too are noted in the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions. Dr. Saddhamangala Karunaratne a former archaeological commissioner of Sri Lanka who specialized on the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka for his Ph. D. degree at a University in England has forthrightly stated that the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu have several features in common and that the Brahmi script was brought to Sri Lanka from Tamil Nadu. The shapes of the letters of these areas mentioned above have certain similarities peculiar to them. Of particular interest in this respect is the shape of ma(ψ). The Sri Lankan inscriptions have the other form of ma(γ) as found in the Asokan edicts also.

The Brahmi devised to write Tamil, the language of the Tamil Nadu had to provide for certain sounds peculiar to the language, like la(σ), la(ρ), ra(ρ) and na(σ). Of these la(σ) is noticeable in the Bhattiprolu inscriptions which are also found in the Dravidian belt of South India - Andhra Pradesh.

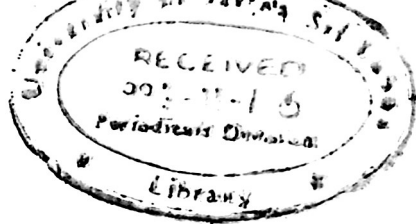
Symbols

Apart from the Brahmi characters, certain symbols are found in the beginning and end of the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka. Prof. S. Paranavitana calls them non-Brahmi symbols and has listed 43 of them (Paranavitana, p. xxvi) The exact significance of these are yet to be studied. A good number of them resemble those found in the Indus Valley seals. The veteran Tamil scholar Mayilai Sini Venkatasami has listed four such symbols found at the end of the inscriptions from Konkarpuliyankulam and Alakarmalai in Tamil Nadu (Sini Venkatasami, p. 18). A few of the symbols are found on the potsherds too.

Thus, a comparative study of the Brahmi inscriptions of South Asia is quite interesting. It has to be done as an in-depth study.

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