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## **Episode-5: Indian Paleography: Part -1: North Indian Inscriptions regarding Sanskrit and allied languages**

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In this episode I am going to explain Indian Paleography with special reference to Sanskrit and allied languages.

It has five segments

1. Introduction to Indian Paleography
2. Origin of scripts
3. Brahmi
4. Nagari
5. Conclusion

1.1 Indian Paleography: Paleography is the science of studying ancient or old symbols or signs. The word paleography is derived from two Greek words, 'Palaios' which means ancient or old and 'graphy' which means symbol. As the word itself suggests it is a science which studies ancient or old symbol or forms. It is also taken for granted that the scripts are very much symbolic and that is why the scripts can be identifying as symbols or signs. Therefore, paleography is a science, which makes the study of the different scripts.

## 2.1 Origin of Scripts:

As far as the origin of the scripts is concerned, the European tradition mentions that the alphabets are invented by Phoenicians, the inhabitants of Phoenicia, which is a small island on the south of Mediterranean Sea and within in reach to Greece.

2.2 In the context of India, different signs are found in the rock art of Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. The archaeologists like A.L. Gourhon attempted to classify signs of the Upper Paleolithic age as wide signs and Narrow signs. Any how the direct relation between the development of script and the use of different signs is a problem still to be solved. The development of graffiti marks, which are found mostly on the pottery of both Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, both in North India and Southern India forms a scale to identify different stages of the development of scripts.

2.3 Discovery of Indus Civilization in 1921-22 A.D. is provides the new material evidence of writing, which is popularly known as Indus Script. But, the evidence in the Indus valley is very poor in language, literature and script. On the seals a variety of signs are found. Archaeologists like S.R.Rao and Iravatham Mahadevan are stating that the signs found on the seals are very much communicable and state that they are not the proto-type of any script but a variant of developed script itself. But it is very much clear that there is no script in the immediately succeeding Aryan period, which is having a vast lore of literature, very much communicable. Moreover, if we accept the presence of any script in Indus valley,

there is no literature, to be called by that name. Finally, the identification of the relation between the scripts in the historical period and the Indus valley epoch is a problem not yet satisfactorily traced, established and solved out.

**2.4 Boustrophedon writing:** Some of the archaeologists are stated that the Indus script was written from left to right and right to left, alternatively, called boustrophedon.

2.5 Historically, in India there were number of scripts. The scripts like Brahmi, Nagari, Tamil Grantha, Kannada and Telugu etc, are written from left to right and have a wider geographical and chronological popularity. The scripts like Kharoshti are written from right to left and resemble Indo-Arabic and Aramaic scripts and are limited in use both geographically and chronologically. Another variety of scripts like Modi, Shanku etc, are also found used by limited people in limited times. Of all these scripts Brahmi acquired national status. Nagari was more in use in entire North India. Kannada script is very popular in Karnataka; Telugu script is in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh for Kannada and Telugu languages in South India. Grantha script was in use in far South for Tamil language.

### **3.1 Brahmi:**

The discovery of the Indus valley writing has led some scholars to guess that Brahmi was locally developed out of the Indus valley system. But no one has been able to demonstrate how this evolution could take place. But it was locally called as Brahma lipi. The pioneering efforts of James Prinsep made the Brahmi script very much intelligible. He could decipher the records in Brahmi and explored the secrecy of those records. The evidences of Brahmi are found as early as the Asokan period and as late as the Ikshvaku period. Hence Brahmi can be found as early as c. 350 B. C. and as late as c. 300 A. D. Thus Brahmi can be seen used roughly within a span of six hundred years. During this period, the Mauryan, Kushana, Satavahana and Ikshvaku dynasties made use of the Brahmi script. Several records of this period are presenting varied dimensions in the script.

#### **4.1 Nagari:**

This is also called Deva Nagari and found very much in use in North India since c. 300 A. D. Presently the languages like Sanskrit and Hindi along with different North Indian languages are make use of the script. A variant of Nagari called Nandi Nagari is used for inscribing copper-plates in late medieval period.

#### **4.1 Evolution of Nagari:**

As has been mentioned above, the Nagari is the basic script of North Indian languages since c. 300 A.D. in the paleographical study of tracing evolution; one must know the causes and process of evolution of scripts. If we observe the North Indian scripts, they are not roundish in nature. On the other hand most of the South Indian scripts are roundish, like Kannada. The regional styles might have differentiated still further but for two important factors which are instrumental in establishing a link between them and also in governing a uniform pattern in their development. The first was the use of a common language, Sanskrit, which helped in the easy movement of letters and scribes from one region to another and the quick dispersal of technical skill or styles of writing. The second was the growth of larger kingdoms, which by their very nature had to adopt a uniform style of writing within their jurisdiction. It is on such assumptions that we can understand how the kausambi style of writing of the second and third century AD gradually spread throughout the middle Ganges Valley and as far east as Bengal after it was adopted by the Guptas.

4.2 The scripts of north India shows a uniform pattern of development both in the body of letters and in the application of the medial vowels. The changes in ornamentation and technical adaptation affect all the scripts equally. Different kinds of ornamentation are noticed In the inscriptions. Generally speaking, the embellishment is seen in the shapes of letters and in the formation of the medial vowels. This development is again seen in the formation of lines in the respective scripts, as dictated by the pen and the stylus. The best example from the north are seen in the Bilsad inscription and the Mehrauli pillar inscription, both of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, as illustrated in the inscriptions of Yashodharman and Mahanaman, the medial vowels grow to their full extent from

the last quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD another tendency is marked in the north Indian inscriptions. The right vertical limbs of the letters become slightly bent inwards, and hence fleet termed it Kuttilla alphabet. At the same time, because of this bending, this vertical makes an acute angle with the base line, and Buhler termed it acute-angled alphabet.

4.3 The Junagadh rock inscription of Rudradaman, the greatest king of the second Western Ksatrapa line of Castana, was written shortly after A.D. 150 and represents a turning point in the history of epigraphic Sanskrit. This is the first long inscription recorded entirely in more or less standard Sanskrit, as well as the first extensive record in the poetic style. Although further specimens of such poetic prasastis in Sanskrit are not found until the Gupta era, from a stylistic point of view Rudradaman's inscription is clearly their prototype. The Junagadh inscription is not pure classical Sanskrit in the sense of the term. This follows the familiar pattern of inscriptions from the early centuries of the Christian era, with the portions concerning the date and other mundane information in more Prakrit language. This suggests that everyday documents were still being written in mixed dialects at this time, so that people would habitually employ set phrases like krtehi in recording dates, even at the head of documents which were to be composed in Sanskrit. Early Sanskrit inscriptions from the Deccan and southern India In general, Sanskrit began to appear in southern Indian inscriptions somewhat later than in the north, and also lagged behind in its gradual adoption there as the primary epigraphic language. The first significant body of southern Sanskrit inscriptions is from Nagarjunakonda, where, in addition to many Prakrit inscriptions, a few in Sanskrit have also been found. But here the unusually early Sanskritization is probably due to Satavahana contacts with the Western Ksatrapas. The Languages of Indie Inscriptions manical (Saiva) donation in good classical verse (anustubh and sragdhard meters). A pillar inscription of the sixteenth regnal year of Satavahana's, also of Saiva content, is in Sanskrit prose but with numerous hybrid characteristics such as the frequent absence of sandhi. A fragmentary Sanskrit inscription on a pillar from the Nagarjunakonda records a Buddhist donation in good classical verse. Thus we have at Nagarjunakonda examples of both standard and hybridized Sanskrit in both Buddhist and

Brahmanical records, and all from a period when Prakrit inscriptions were also still being written. The determining factor in the linguistic choice seems to be neither sectarian nor chronological but verse versus prose: standard or near-standard Sanskrit is used in versified inscriptions, while hybridized Sanskrit appears in the prose texts. This distinction is reminiscent of similar patterns in earlier inscriptions from the north, notably the Mora well inscription. Several of the early specimens of epigraphic Sanskrit from other southern Indian sites occur in bilingual Sanskrit and Prakrit records. A typical example is the Basim copper plates of the Vakataka ruler Vindhyasakti II, who ruled around the middle to late fourth century A.D. In this inscription the introductory genealogical portion is in Sanskrit, while the remainder, that is, the functional portion of the grant, is in Prakrit. Here once again the situation is comparable to that of some northern inscriptions of an earlier period, such as Nasik no. 10. Similar patterns emerge in this period in the far south. Indian Epigraphy Finally, after this transitional period in the fourth and early fifth centuries A.D., Prakrit fell out of use completely in southern Indian inscriptions. For the next few centuries Sanskrit was the sole epigraphic language, until the regional Dravidian languages began to come into use around the seventh century. Early Sanskrit inscriptions from other regions With the exception of the very early Ayodhya inscription discussed earlier, there are few early Sanskrit inscriptions from eastern and northeastern India. Some brief records of the "Magha" kings of Kausambi of the second century A.D. are in Sanskrit or in a highly Sanskritized hybrid: for example, the Bandhogarh inscriptions nos. 18 and 19 of Vaisravana (and apparently also the fragmentary no. 14 of Sivamagha, the Kosam pillar inscription of Vaisravana). Apart from such scattered and marginal examples, the earliest true Sanskrit inscription from the northeast (besides Ayodhya) is probably the Susuniya (West Bengal) rock inscription, datable to about the middle of the fourth century. From the far north, a notable set of relatively early Sanskrit inscriptions in more or less correct classical style are the Jagatpur (Dehradun Dist., UP) asvamedha brick inscriptions of King Shavarman (SI 1.98-9), dated paleographically to about the third century A.D. From about the fifth century A.D., Sanskrit inscriptions become common in various countries outside of India, particularly Cambodia, Vietnam, and Nepal. The emergence of Sanskrit in the Gupta period It was during the reign of the early Gupta emperors

in the fourth century A.D. that Sanskrit was finally established as the epigraphic language par excellence of the Indian world. The turning point appears in the inscriptions of Samudragupta (middle to late fourth century), especially the Allahabad pillar inscription, which, despite a few trivial orthographic irregularities, is often held up as a model of high classical literary style of the mixed prose and verse (campu) class. From this point on, all the inscriptions of the Guptas and their neighbors and feudatories in northern India were written in correct classical Sanskrit. Thus by about the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries A.D., Sanskrit had at last established itself as virtually the sole language for epigraphic use throughout India. Prakrit, from this time onward, virtually fell out of epigraphic use, with occasional exceptions for literary effect or sectarian considerations. Sanskrit continued to enjoy its privileged position in the north for many centuries, until regional NIA and "Islamic" languages began to appear in inscriptions of the medieval period; even then Sanskrit was never completely supplanted, and has continued to be used sporadically up to modern times. In the south, the regional (i.e., Dravidian) languages made their appearance earlier and more prominently, but there too not entirely at the cost of Sanskrit, which continued to be used as an alternative to or in bilingual combination with the Dravidian languages throughout the ancient and medieval periods.

Summary: Historical and cultural factors in the development of Sanskrit as an epigraphic language

Near the end of the pre-Christian era, we find a smattering of inscriptions of Brahmanical content recording religious donations and foundations in standard or nearly standard Sanskrit, and we may assume that these are isolated survivals of what must have been an increasingly common practice in this period. About the beginning of the Christian era, we begin to find more examples of epigraphic Sanskrit among the abundant inscriptions from Mathura and surrounding regions, and it appears to be more than coincidence that this development appeared at precisely the time when this area of northern India came under the domination of the Scythian "Ksatrapa" rulers . This suspicion is confirmed by the appearance, in the next century, of Sanskrit inscriptions in the domains of the early Western Ksatrapas in Maharashtra and Gujarat, culminating in Rudradaman's Junagadh rock inscription, the first long epigraphic text in virtually classical language and style. Thus it appears that the use of Sanskrit for

inscriptions was promoted, though not originated, by the Scythian rulers of northern and western India in the first two centuries of the Christian era. Their motivation in promoting Sanskrit was presumably a desire to establish themselves as legitimate Indian or at least Indianized rulers and to curry the favor of the educated Brahmanical elite. In other words, the forces and motivations behind epigraphic Sanskritization were evidently the same as those which promoted the development and spread of the hybrid language at the cost of MIA, and indeed these two developments must have taken place more or less simultaneously. As discussed earlier, for several centuries there was available to the composers and scribes of inscriptions a range of linguistic choices comprising MIA, hybrid, and Sanskrit, from which the appropriate dialect could be chosen according to such factors as the purpose and contents of the record, its sectarian affiliations, or simply personal preferences and abilities. But the direction of movement along this spectrum was consistently toward Sanskrit, promoted by the previously mentioned legitimizing motivations of the nonIndian rulers, as well as by the inherent status of this elite language. Thus eventually, and inevitably, Sanskrit completely supplanted Prakrit and the mixed dialects. The spread of epigraphic Sanskrit to the south in subsequent centuries can also be attributed to the influence, direct or indirect, of the Western Ksatrapas. In this 94 Indian Epigraphy connection it is significant that the earliest southern Indian Sanskrit inscriptions come from Nagarjunakonda , since other inscriptions from the same site attest to the connections of the Ksatrapas and other western Indian rulers with it; for instance, a Nagarjunakonda memorial pillar inscription of the time of King Rudrapurusadatta attests to a marital alliance between the Western Ksatrapas and the Ikshvaku rulers of Nagarjunakonda. The movement toward Sanskrit was thus already well entrenched by the early years of the Gupta empire, when Sanskrit was adopted as the sole administrative language for epigraphic and (presumably) other purposes, and when the high classical style became the standard mode. The Guptas thus merely brought to its logical conclusion a gradual process which had been going on for the previous four centuries or so. The adoption of Sanskrit by the Guptas is sometimes thought to represent a Brahmanical revival under their auspices; and while there may be something to this, it would be a serious oversimplification to picture the triumph of Sanskrit

merely as a victory of the Brahmanical language over the MIA and hybrid dialects associated with the Buddhists and Jains. It is certainly true that, on the whole, Sanskrit was first and most frequently employed epigraphically in Brahmanical circles (as in Ayodhya, Hathibada/Ghosundl, etc.), and that many of the earliest and best specimens of Sanskrit from subsequent sites such as Mathura and Nagarjunakonda are in Brahmanical records. But several other early Sanskrit inscriptions from these sites are Buddhist, and possibly also Jaina. Particularly interesting is the situation at Nagarjunakonda, where the Sanskrit inscriptions seem to be distributed equally, in terms of number and style, between Buddhist and Brahmanical records. Thus while the Brahmans and their clients may have led the way in the Sanskritization of epigraphic language, the Buddhists did not lag far behind and were no doubt also influential in the process. These patterns should not, however, be uncritically extrapolated to nonepigraphic contexts. It should be kept in mind that, in the words of Burrow, "The inscriptional evidence gives a very one-sided picture of the contemporary linguistic conditions. ... Sanskrit was always, even when the use of Prakrit was most flourishing, the primary literary language of India." In other words, the limited and sporadic use of Sanskrit in inscriptions prior to the Gupta era does not mean that Sanskrit as a language of literature, culture, and ritual was in abeyance but simply that inscriptions were not yet felt to be literary documents worthy of its use. The gradual Sanskritization of inscriptions reflects, on the one hand, the formalization of inscriptions into a mode of literary expression, and on the other, the spread of Sanskrit into the administrative realm, which was fully accomplished under the Guptas and their contemporaries.

### **Conclusion:**

This discussion is providing only glimpse of North Indian paleography and it could be better understand only with the practical observation of each letter in chronological and cultural context.

### **Assignments**

1. Practice the Brahmi script.
2. Study the Junagadh rock inscription of Rudradaman.
3. Note down the importance of Mehrauli pillar inscription.
4. Make a list of Prakrit inscriptions.
5. Practice the Kharoshti script.
6. Try to read Modi script.
7. Practice the estampaging of inscriptions.
8. Practice the South Indian Scripts.
9. Practice the North Indian Scripts.
10. Practice the evolution of Nagari script.

## FAQ

1. Who invented alphabets ?

**A: alphabets are invented by Pheonecians**

2. Which is the is the basic script of North Indian languages ?

**A : Nagari is the basic script of North Indian languages.**

3. What do you mean by Paleography ?

**A : Paleography is the science of studying ancient or old symbols or signs.**

4. From which period Rock art are found in India ?

**A : From Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic periods Rock art are found in India.**

5. Which script is also called Deva Nagari ?

**A: Nagari script is also called Deva Nagari.**

6. To whom the Junagadh rock inscription belonged ?

**A : The Junagadh rock inscription belonged to Rudradaman.**

7. From where the first significant body of southern Sanskrit inscription is recorded ?

**A : The first significant body of southern Sanskrit inscription is recorded from Nagarjunakonda.**

8. The king Rudradaman belonged to which kingdom?

**A : The king Rudradaman belonged to Western Ksatrapa kingdom.**

9. To whom the Basim copper plates belonged ?

**A : Basim copper plates belonged to the Vakataka ruler Vindhyaśakti II.**

10. Who deciphered the Brahmi script ?

**A: James Prinsep deciphered the Brahmi script.**

## Quiz

1. the Brahmi script is deciphered by

a. John Marshall

b. Alexander Cunningham

**c. James Prinsep**

d. All the above.

2. Alphabets are invented by-----

**a. Pheonecians**

b.Chinese

c.Greeks

d. Mauryans

3. The word paleography is derived from ----- words, 'Palaios'

**a. Greek**

b.Chinese

c. Latin

d.Spanish

4. The Junagadh rock inscription belonged to -----

a. Ashoka

b.Samudragupta

c.Vishnugupta

**d. Rudradaman**

5. ----- found very much in use in North India

a.Tulu

**b. Deva Nagari**

c.Tamil

d.Kannada

6. Mehrauli inscription is a-----

**a. Pillar inscription**

- b. Stone inscription
- c. Copper plate inscription
- d. None of the above.

7. Phoenicians, the inhabitants of -----

**a. Phoenicia**

b. Chinese

c. Latin

d. Spanish

8. "Islamic" languages began to appear in inscriptions of the -----

a. Ancient period

**b. Medieval period**

c. Modern period

d. All the above

9. The Mehrauli pillar inscription belongs to the

**a. 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.**

b. 8<sup>th</sup> century AD.

c. 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

d. 11<sup>th</sup> century AD.

10. Brahmi can be found as early as c. -----

a. 250 C.E

b. 250 B.C.E

**C. 350 B. C.E**

d. 150 C.E