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Speak Up

ORIGIN OF THE BRĀHMĪ SCRIPT: JAIN, BUDDHIST, AND HINDŪ PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Mukesh Mehta

mukeshmehta@isjs.in

The Brāhmī script is one of the oldest writing systems in the Indian subcontinent, serving as the foundation for many modern scripts used in South Asia today. Its origin is a subject of much debate and interest, and different religious traditions—Jain, Buddhist, and Hindū—offer unique perspectives on its emergence and development. This article explores the origin of the Brāhmī script from these three perspectives, shedding light on how each tradition views this ancient writing system. It also analyses the different viewpoints of various scholars and discusses the popularization and formalization of the term Brāhmī.

JAIN PERSPECTIVE

The Jain tradition holds a significant place in the history of the Brāhmī script. According to Jain scriptures (i.e., Āvaśyaka-bhāṣya, Viśeṣāvaśyaka, Āvaśyaka-cūrṇī, etc.), the Brāhmī script was invented by the first Tīrthāṅkara Ādinātha (Ṛṣabhadeva), who is believed to have introduced the script to his daughter, Brāhmī or Bāmbhī. She is considered the first person to have learned and propagated this script, which was later named after her.

In Jain literature, the Brāhmī script is seen as divine knowledge passed down through spiritual lineage, highlighting the script's sacred origins. Jain texts like the Vyākhyāprajñapti-sūtra and others often refer to Brāhmī. The Vyākhyāprajñapti-sūtra mentions, “*namo bambhīe libīe*”, i.e.,



salutation to the Brāhmī script with its mention to iconic Ṇamokāra Mantra. The association of Brāhmī with Rishabhadeva underscores its importance in the Jain tradition, symbolizing the transmission of sacred knowledge and the beginning of literacy in Jainism.

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

The Lalitavistara-sūtra, a later Buddhist (Sāṃskṛta) text mentions that Siddhārtha (Gautama) was aware of 64 types of scripts and Brāhmī was the first of those. The Buddhist perspective on the Brāhmī script is closely tied to the spread of Buddhism across the Indian subcontinent and beyond. The script played a crucial role in documenting and disseminating the teachings of Gautama Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, during the reign of Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century BCE, Brāhmī was the script used for inscribing his edicts, which were spread across his vast empire.

Asoka's use of the Brāhmī script to propagate Dhamma (Buddhist teachings) is a pivotal moment in history. The rock and pillar edicts, inscribed in Brāhmī, communicated messages of peace, morality, and religious tolerance to the public. This widespread use of Brāhmī under Asoka's patronage not only solidified the script's prominence but also ensured the survival and spread of Buddhist teachings throughout Asia.

For Buddhists, the Brāhmī script symbolizes the preservation and transmission of the Buddha's teachings. It is seen as a tool that helped in spreading the Dhamma to a broader audience, making it accessible to people of different regions and languages within Asoka's empire and beyond.

HINDŪ PERSPECTIVE

In the Hindū tradition, the Brāhmī script is often linked to the development of Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism. It is believed that Brāhmī originated and propagated by the Brāhmī, another name for Sarasvatī (the goddess of speech), which is the personified female energy of Lord Brahmā (the creator). Although there is a lack of proper evidence supporting



this view. Thus, from the Hindū perspective, Brāhmī is seen as a script that was divinely inspired, with some attributing its origin to the god Brahmā, the creator in Hindu mythology. This association underscores the script's divine status in Hinduism, where language and writing are often considered sacred, embodying the power of the spoken word or “*vāk*.”

CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN PERSPECTIVES

- While Jain, Buddhist, and Hindū traditions each offer unique narratives regarding the origin of Brāhmī, there is a convergence in the belief that the script holds a sacred and foundational role from the viewpoint of their religion and teachings.
- Jainism views Brāhmī as a script of divine origin, directly linked to the teachings of the Tīrthamkaras.
- Buddhism, similarly, links it to the Lord Buddha and regards Brāhmī as a vital tool for the dissemination of Dhamma, particularly under Asoka's rule.
- Hinduism links the origin of Brāhmī to the Lord Brahmā, the creator.
- However, the divergence lies in the specific religious and historical contexts each tradition emphasizes.

VIEWPOINTS OF MODERNS SCHOLARS

The origin of the Brāhmī script, one of the oldest writing systems of South Asia, has been a topic of extensive scholarly debate. Here are some viewpoints of various scholars:

View-I: Indigenous Development

G.R. Hunter and S.R. Rao: It evolved independently within the Indian subcontinent. They argue that it was an indigenous development possibly derived from pre-existing Indian symbols and signs used in the Indus Valley Civilization or other early cultures.

K. Rajan & D. Chakrabarti: It is similar to (might be derived from) ancient Tamil graffiti marks or symbolic wall writings.



A. Cunningham: It is an Indian invention and is based on purely the system of Indigenous hieroglyphics.

View-II: Semitic Influence

Albrecht Weber, Dr Deeke, G Bühler, MJ Halevy, Rhys Davids: It was derived from a Semitic script, such as Phoenician, Aramaic, or South Arabian scripts. They argue that Brāhmī was adapted to suit the phonetics of Indian languages.

View-III: Greek Influence

Isaac Taylor: It might have been influenced by Greek scripts, particularly following Alexander the Great's invasion of India.

View-IV: Persian Influence

S.R. Goyal: This theory posits that Brāhmī may have been influenced by the Achaemenid Persian script due to the presence of the Persian Empire in the northwest of India.

View-V: Multisource Influence

Richard Salomon: It may have evolved through a combination of influences from multiple sources, including indigenous development and foreign scripts.

FORMALIZATION AND POLARIZATION OF THE TERM

I have not come across any proper reference that the name Brāhmī was given by any single individual. It seems to emerge from a historical and scholarly tradition. Although the term Brāhmī (Bambhī) is found in ancient Jain and Buddhist texts, it has been formalized and popularized by modern scholars studying ancient Indian scripts. The modern understanding and formalization of the name came through the work of early epigraphists and scholars. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the term Brāhmī had become the standard designation for the



script in scholarly literature. It was used to describe the script used in ancient inscriptions and manuscripts and became a key term in the study of ancient Indian epigraphy.

Considering these two related works of the 19th and 20th centuries – 1. On the Origin of the Indian Brahma Alphabet (Georg Bühler, 1895), and 2. Discovery of Ancient Brahmi Script in Kashmir (J.E. Abbott, 1903); it seems that the term is derived from or related to Brahmā or Brāhman, which has connotations of sacredness and authority in Indian culture. The use of this term reflects the script's significant role in recording religious and administrative documents.

OBSERVATIONS

The Brāhmī script, viewed through Jain, Buddhist, and Hindū lenses, is more than an ancient writing system. It is a symbol of religious and cultural heritage, a means of preserving and spreading sacred knowledge, and a tool of communication that transcends regional and linguistic barriers. Each tradition acknowledges Brāhmī's pivotal role in their history, albeit with different emphasis on its origins and significance. Together, these perspectives enrich our understanding of Brāhmī's place in the cultural and religious landscape of ancient India.

One of the primary challenges in pinpointing the exact origin of Brāhmī is the lack of direct and conclusive evidence linking it to any single predecessor script. The extensive trade, conquests, and cultural interactions between ancient India and other civilizations make it plausible that Brāhmī could have been influenced by multiple sources. Continued archaeological discoveries and research may provide further insights into this foundational script of ancient India.
