

Brahmi: the mother of all Indic scripts

A message for all

Jain lore holds that when Mahavira attained enlightenment, he did not speak right away. He gave his first sermon after more than two months of silence^{[1][2]}. To hear the Jina speak, not only humans, but all beings assembled in a specially created hall, which included lakes for the aquatic creatures. The message was understood by each in their own language^{[4][5][6]}.

A beautiful tale, it perhaps brings out the deep relationship between knowledge and language, and the glory of speaking in a way that everyone understands.

It is perhaps no surprise that Mahavira most likely spoke and preached in Ardha-magadhi, which is often thought to be one of the most commonly spoken languages of the time. Mahavira was championing not just the essence and the truth of life, but also the language and the way in which it is shared amongst people^{[7][8][9][10][11][12]}.

Access to language is critical to not only the relationship between thinkers and laypeople, but also to the lives and professions of lay individuals, and eventually to the fabric of the society they are in.

Language and script

Languages and scripts are not the same thing. Languages are spoken and each language may have subgroups, such as dialects. Many languages today can be written down, and the writing system is known as the script. One language may be written in multiple scripts, and one script may be used to write multiple languages. The origins of language in particular can be difficult to trace because language mostly requires no

physical medium. Scripts have physical evidence to back them up, but written material represents a very small part of all language. Moreover, only a tiny fraction of that material has been recovered and read so far. This is especially true the further we go back in history; the earliest languages that we know of had no scripts to begin with. Nonetheless, both are critical to our understanding of both the past as well as the present moment.

Common tongues

To understand society in any context, historical or otherwise, It is, therefore, important to understand the common tongues and the social direction the keepers of those languages may have encouraged.

In ancient India, Sanskrit was an important language. Though its roots are not known, it has existed for thousands of years in Vedic and later in Classical forms. In contemporary popular culture, Sanskrit is sometimes understood to be the mother of all languages and the major tongue spoken by a majority of ancient Indians^[14]. This, however, is not an entirely accurate view^[13].

Sanskrit was the language of Vedic rituals and learning, and in certain stretches of history, it was most likely restricted to the priestly and scholarly classes. While the answers to the natural queries that people have about their place in the world were derived from the Vedas, the Vedas and these answers themselves were captured in Sanskrit. Since everyone didn't follow Sanskrit, large parts of the population faced a kind of philosophical vacuum. This was naturally filled by thinkers and leaders who spoke in more familiar languages^{[12][13][14]}.

Large parts of the population in the subcontinent spoke various dialects, each of which have their own histories and characteristics. These dialects are collectively known by contemporary scholars as Prakrit, or 'natural language'. It is

no surprise that the earliest Jains and Buddhists not only spoke and preached, but also composed their literature in various Prakrits. Like Sanskrit, the origins of Prakrit are unknown, and their early evolution is not well-understood.

The preference of Prakrits over Sanskrit amongst the earliest Jains indicate a step away from the conversations centred around gods, rituals and priests to conversations centred around people, nature and one's own actions.

Coupled with the relative philosophical simplicity of Jain and Buddhist ideas, the immediate connection created with large masses of people through preachings in easy language was critical for these traditions to succeed^{[3][12][15][16][18]}.

Traditions of knowledge

The connection that Jains in particular have with language runs deeper than the initial common ground that the ascetics shared on the basis of a common tongue. This connection stems from the very philosophical depths of Jainism, that is the pursuit of liberation and a potentially absolute truth: Jain thinkers attach the highest importance to categorizing, recording, and teaching the various philosophies and ethics about the world.

Jain philosophy is often simplified and explained for laypeople. These documents have extremely meticulous instructions regarding how one can live a non-violent life. There are instructions for all aspects of life, including food, agriculture and even the handling of waste. Each such instruction on ethics was eventually formalized, composed and later written down into collected works. Jains emphasize learning and correct knowledge in general and they also commend learning truths that one obtains through spiritual practice.

Jains look at Mahavira for ethical ideals. His quest for truth and his life of teaching are Jain ideals as well. Mahavira is

known to have been a strict disciplinarian. The Jain preoccupation with categorizing knowledge, writing and education are reflective of Mahavira's systematic approach to enlightenment.

Even the ideal of Jain asceticism is mainly built around knowledge and conduct rather than belief and ritual^{[3][12][15][16]}. However, despite the Jain tradition of learning, the earliest surviving Jain documents are from hundreds of years after Mahavira.

An ancient writing system

The lack of early writing is not entirely to be ascribed to negligence or historical losses of any kind. The reason is that Indian culture hinged heavily on oral traditions of knowledge which were passed down through generations. Language wasn't written down for a long time^{[19][21]}. It is, however, significant that the earliest writings found in the Indian subcontinent are in Prakrit and not in Sanskrit^[22].

This indicates that not only did Jain and Buddhist leaders have a great agency over society of the time, but it also means that by the time Sanskrit began to be written down, scripts were already ripened on the basis of writing local dialects. The language of the Vedic gentry would eventually come to stand on the scripts championed by their rivals, the Jains and the Buddhists.

The script in which earliest Jain documents are found is known to have existed for a very long time in the subcontinent, and its origins are not agreed on. It may have existed since before the 5th century BCE, though the early dates are not well-settled. More concrete evidence is available from the 3rd century BCE onwards. Connections to Aramic and the Indus Script have been proposed by various scholars, though the exact relationships, and the proportion of influences are unclear^{[21][23][24]}.

In any case, the script survived from ancient times till hundreds of years later. Known as Brahmi, it is the earliest deciphered script found in the subcontinent. The earliest epigraphic references to the Jains, such as the 7th pillar edict of Ashoka or the inscription at Hathigumpha are also in Brahmi^[25].

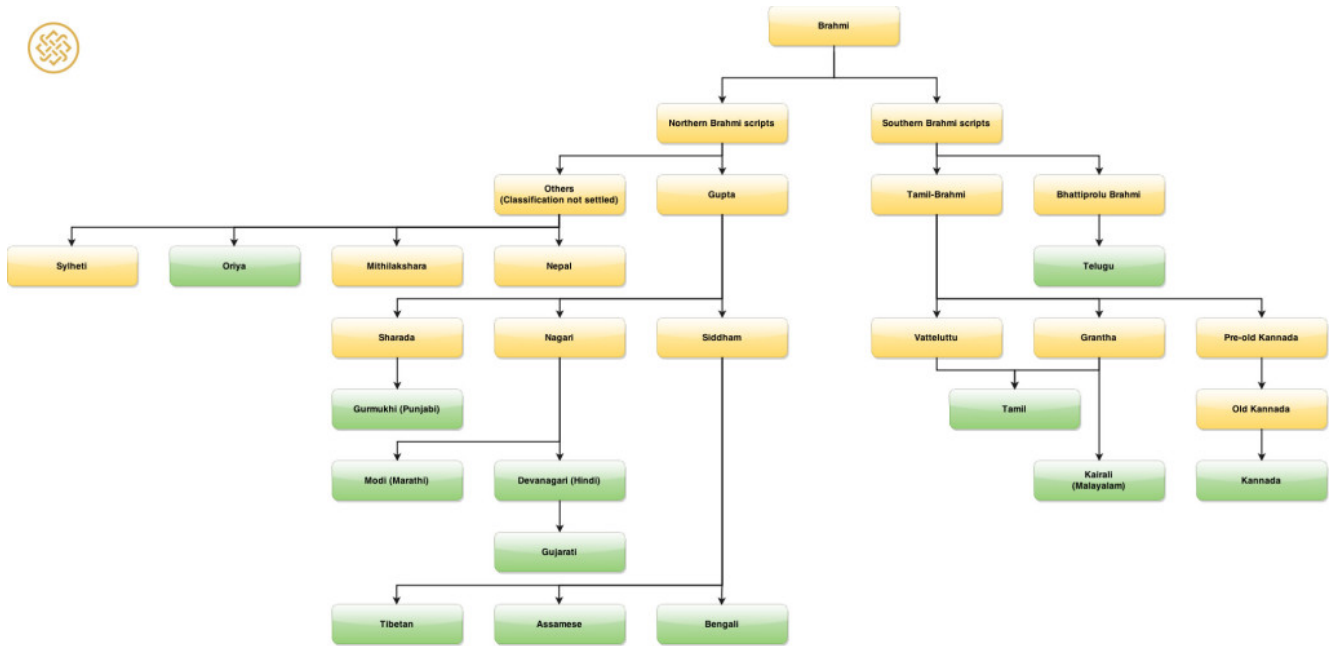
Written by each in their own language

Evidences for early regional variants of Brahmi are as early as the evidence for Brahmi itself^{[26][27]}. Over hundreds of years, Brahmi developed subfamilies, each with their own subgroups and variants, each of which often corresponds to geographical regions and to local languages or dialects.

Prakrit written in Brahmi are amongst the earliest deciphered texts that can be found in India. By comparison, written evidence for Sanskrit is found much later. Sanskrit was mainly an oral language, and the prime Sanskrit text, the Vedas, were probably not written down for several hundreds of years. It is interesting to note that some of the earliest written Sanskrit material, like for example the 1st century CE inscription at Junagadh by Rudradaman, is written in Brahmi or in scripts derived from Brahmi.

The Brahmi family-tree

Topological representation of the partial, condensed tree



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Access to language and script are key to social mobility

Brahmi, however, is primarily associated with the Prakrit languages. This is an important insight into ancient Indian society; those who wrote in Prakrits must have been witnessing and possibly influencing common society closely.

Classical scriptures such as Sanskrit are orally taught and must be memorized permanently; this takes a long time. It may become limited to only those who dedicatedly learn such material. By comparison, material written in a common language using a common script is easier to transmit. In this way, people who would otherwise be caught up in daily life get access to philosophical literature more easily, which in turn has the effect of altering the way they live their lives.

In this light, the role Mahavira, Buddha, and Jains and Buddhists in general becomes clearer. That the Jain and Buddhist ways of life took hold in the subcontinent evident in the prominent threads of non-violence and systematic vegetarianism that India has today.

Rich legacies

The legacy, however, is not just in the way many people think and live in India—it is also within the language and script

themselves. All contemporary Indic writing systems, in the north, east, west and south, as well as many other Asian writing systems are traced back to Brahmi. The descendents of Brahmi include Devanagari, Tamil, Tibetan, and Thai^{[29][30]}. All these scripts and the languages written using them were nourished and patronized by Jain and Buddhist ascetics.

The earliest writing system for Tamil, for example, is thought to be indicated in some Jain works as 'Damili'. Damili is thought to be a reference to the Tamil-Brahmi system. Inscriptions found on cave-temples also indicated a close early relationship between Tamil-Brahmi, Jain religious writing, and proto-Tamil^{[32][33][34][35]}.

Similarly, some of the earliest preserved writing in Kannada are Jain religious works. In parallel, the writing system in Kannada is derived from Brahmi. Moreover, most of early Kannada literature in general were composed by Jains. The three gems of Kannada poetry, Pampa, Ranna and Ponna were all Jains^{[36][37][38]}.

Jain writing, however, does not exclude Sanskrit. One of the most important Jain documents, the Tattvartha Sutra is also the first Jain scripture to be written in Sanskrit. This is the most important scripture considered canon by all sects of Jains. Its author, Umasvati, is often described as the first Jain author in Sanskrit^[39]. However, anecdotes about later Jain authors such as Siddhasena Divakara reveal another side.

In one such account, Siddhasena Divakara is either exiled or instructed to penance for twelve years for offering to translate all Jain literature to Sanskrit. This account is found much later after Siddhasena's time. The story may or may not have a basis in an actual event, but it does indicate that there existed at some point a marked difference and rivalry between the Sanskrit and Prakrit traditions^[31]. In any case,

Sanskrit eventually got integrated into the Jain sphere.

As younger languages emerged, Jain thinkers pioneered them as well. For example, one Banarasidas has many works in one dialect of Hindi^[37]. These are considered to be amongst the important early works in the language. Hemachandra, an important Jain ascetic and teacher in the 12th century CE, is considered a seminal figure in the development of both the Rajasthani and Gujarati languages^{[37][40]}.

It is significant to note that a number of languages have deeper roots in local dialects rather than Sanskrit. Moreover, even the ones which essentially have a base in Sanskrit borrow very heavily from Prakrits and also have several post-Sanskrit components, all of which continue to have influences of non-Vedic traditions including Jainism well into the late medieval era.

Amongst existing languages, on the basis of literary evidence, it may be said that Jain thinkers and scribes influenced Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Telugu, Oriya, Hindi, Gujarati, and Rajasthani language and literature directly or indirectly^{[28][37][41]}. If one extends support from parallel evidence, like the extant script systems or archaeological finds, then it may be said that Jainism must have influenced practically every major linguistic-cultural thread in India in some way, though the exact mechanics of these influences may not always be clearly established.

A wealth of words

Jains continue to remain pioneers of learning and language even today. The Koba library in Gujarat contains more than 200,000 manuscripts from all across India from the early medieval era onwards. Padamsagar Suri ji, a Jain ascetic and the mentor at Koba started this vast collection through his own hands-on effort where he walked around the country and collected manuscripts as he encountered them. Many of these

are rare, and many more are yet untranslated. The documents are preserved in air-tight vaults and are restored using non-violent techniques in line with Jain ideals.

The relationship of languages, scripts, societies and various Jain and Buddhist pioneers is fundamental to understanding the history of the subcontinent, and more broadly, to understanding how ideas and knowledge can have deep and wide impacts not only by the force of their content, but also by the force of the messenger and the medium.

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Text and diagram: Anveshan

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