

# Evolution of script in India

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## Manifest pedagogy

UPSC in recent times has been asking tangential questions surrounding a personality. This is being done by linking dimensions in the syllabus with the personality. Iravatham Mahadevan which was in news last week. His contributions to scripts particularly Harappan Script and Brahmi script was immense. So the issue of growth of language and script become a relevant topic.

## In news

*Death of Iravatham Mahadevan an Indian epigraphist with expertise in Tamil-brahmi and Indus Valley script.*

## Placing it in syllabus

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

## Dimensions

1. Difference between language and script
2. Indus valley script and the unending debate on its decipherment
3. The prominence of Brahmi script
4. The evolution of various scripts of India from Brahmi.
5. Modern Indian scripts.

## Content

A language usually refers to the spoken language, a method of communication. A script refers to a collection of characters used to write one or more languages. A language is a method of

communication. Scripts are writing systems that allow the transcription of a language, via alphabet sets.

## **Indus script**

After the pictographic and petroglyph representations of early man the first evidence of a writing system can be seen in the Indus valley civilization. The earliest evidence of which is found on the pottery and pot shreds of Rahman Dheri and these potter's marks, engraved or painted, are strikingly similar to those appearing in the Mature Indus symbol system.

Later the writing system can be seen on the seals and sealings of Harappan period. Most inscriptions containing these symbols are extremely short (5 symbols), making it difficult to judge whether or not these symbols constituted a script used to record a language, or even symbolize a writing system.

The long inscriptions are found in Gujarat particularly Dholavira where we find slabs of stone inscribed with inscriptions which might represent name plates of the houses with 24 to 34 symbols.

The characters are largely **pictorial but include many abstract signs**. The inscriptions are thought to have been written mostly from **right-to-left** (because there are several instances of the symbols being compressed on the left side, as if the writer is running out of space at the end of the row there), but they sometimes follow a boustrophedonic (sarphalekhana) style. The number of principal signs is about 400. Since that is considered too large a number for each character to be a phonogram, the script is generally believed to instead **be logo-syllabic**.

There were arguments that the Indus **script is nonlinguistic**, which symbolise families, clans, gods, and religious concepts and are similar **to totem poles**. Based on the extreme brevity of the inscriptions, the existence of too many rare signs and the lack of the random-looking sign repetition that is typical

of language.

But others have argued that it is a linguistic system and the debate shifted to whether it is the predecessor of **Dravidian script or the Brahmi script**.

Some scholars, have argued that the Brahmi script has some connection with the Indus system, but others, such as **Iravatham Mahadevan**, have argued that the script had a relation to a Dravidian language. This debate has been further fuelled by the arguments of who were the initial and original inhabitants of India the Aryan's or the Dravidian's.

### **Brahmi script**

Brahmi is the originator of most of the present Indian scripts, including **Devanagari, Bengali, Tamil, and Malayalam** etc. It developed into two broad types in Northern and Southern India, in the Northern one being **more angular and the Southern one being more circular**. It was deciphered in **1838 by James Prinsep**. The best-known Brahmi inscriptions are the **rock-cut edicts of Ashoka** in north-central India, dated to 250–232 BCE.

Many scholars support that Brahmi probably derives from Aramaic influence and others support that the Brahmi language can have some Indus script influence.

The Brahmi script confirms to the syllabic writing system and was used **more for writing Prakrit, the language spoken by ordinary people** initially and **later Sanskrit also was written in this script**.

According to the epigraphers- All Indian scripts are derived from Brahmi. There are two main families of scripts:

1. 1. **Devanagari**, which is the basis of the languages of northern and western India: Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Marathi, Dogri, Panjabi, etc.

## 2. **Dravidian** which shows the formats of **Grantha and Vatteluttu.**

### **Kharosthi Script**

It is the sister script and contemporary of Brahmi. It was written from right to left. It was used in the Gandhara culture of North-Western India and is sometimes also called **the Gandhari Script**. Its inscriptions have been found in the form of Buddhist Texts from present day Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **Gupta Script**

It is also known as the Late Brahmi script. It was used for writing Sanskrit in the Gupta period. It gave rise to the **Nagari, Sarada and Siddhamatrika scripts** which in turn gave rise to the most important scripts of India such as Devanagari, Bengali etc.

### **Nagari Script**

It was an Eastern variant of the Gupta script. It is an early form of the Devanagari script. It branched off into many other scripts such as Devanagari. It was used to write both Prakrit and Sanskrit.

It is the main script at present to write standard Hindi and Nepali. It is also used presently to write Sanskrit and is one of the most used writing systems in the world. It is composed of Deva **meaning, God and Nagari meaning city**, which meant that it, was both **religious and urbane or sophisticated**.

It is written from left to right, has a strong preference for symmetrical rounded shapes within squared outlines, and is recognisable by a horizontal line that runs along the top of full letters. In a cursory look, the Devanagari script appears different from other Indic scripts such as Bangla, Oriya or Gurmukhi, but a closer examination reveals

they are very similar except for angles and structural emphasis.

### **Sarada Script**

The Sarada or Sharada script of the Brahmic family of scripts, developed around the 8th century. It was used for **writing Sanskrit and Kashmiri**. Originally more widespread, its use became later restricted to Kashmir, and it is now rarely used except by the Kashmiri Pandit community for ceremonial purposes. Sarada is another name **for Saraswati, the goddess of learning**.

### **Siddhamatrika script (Kutila)**

This script was prominent in **eastern India** in 6th century AD leading to subsequent evolution of **Gaudi script**. This Eastern Nagari script or Bengali-Assamese script defines the unified usage of Bengali script and Assamese script though minor variations within. Its usage is associated with the two main languages Bengali and Assamese.

### **Western India**

#### **Landa script**

The Landa scripts, meaning “without a tail”, is a Punjabi word used to refer to scripts in North India. Landa is a script that evolved from the Sarada script during the 10th century. It was used to write Punjabi, Hindi, Sindhi, Saraiki, Balochi, Kashmiri, Pashto and various Punjabi dialects.

#### **Gurmukhi script**

Gurmukhi is an alphabetic developed from the Landa scripts and was standardized during the 16th century by **Guru Angad**, the second guru of Sikhism. The whole of the **Guru Granth Sahib** is written in this script, and it is the script most commonly used by Sikhs and Hindus for writing the Punjabi language.

# Deccan

## Modi script

Modi is a script used to write **the Marathi language**, which is the primary language spoken in the state of Maharashtra in western India. Modi was an official script used to write Marathi until the 20th century when the **Balbodh style of the Devanagari script was promoted as the standard writing system** for Marathi. Although Modi was primarily used to write Marathi.

## Gujarati script

The Gujarati script, which like all Nagari writing system is a type of alphabet, is used to write the Gujarati and Kutchi languages. It is a variant of Devanagari script differentiated by the loss of the **characteristic horizontal line running above the letters** and by a small number of modifications in the remaining characters. The Gujarati script is also often used to write Sanskrit and Hindi.

## South India

### Grantha Script

It is one of the earliest Southern scripts to originate from Brahmi. It branched off into Tamil and Malayalam scripts, which are still used to write those languages.

It is also the predecessor of the Sinhala script used in Sri Lanka. A variant of Grantha called Pallava was taken by Indian merchants in Indonesia, where it led to the development of many South-East Asian scripts. It was used in Tamil Nadu to write the Sanskrit Granthas and hence, was named Grantha.

The Grantha script was widely-used between the sixth century and the 20th centuries by Tamil speakers in South India,

particularly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, to write Sanskrit, and is still in restricted use in traditional Vedic schools. It is a Brahmic script, having evolved from the Brahmi script in Tamil Nadu. The Malayalam script is a direct descendant of Grantha.

### **Vatteluttu Script**

It was a script derived from the Brahmi and was used in the Southern part of India. **It was used to write Tamil and Malayalam.** It removed those signs from Brahmi, which were not needed for writing the Southern languages. Presently, both Tamil and Malayalam have moved on to their own Grantha derived scripts. **Vatteluttu is one of the three main alphabet systems developed by Tamil people to write the Proto-Tamil language, alongside the ancient Grantha or Pallava alphabet and the Tamil script.**

### **Kadamba Script**

It is a descendant of Brahmi and marks the birth of the dedicated Kannada script. It led to the development of modern Kannada and Telugu scripts. It was used to write Sanskrit, Konkani, Kannada and Marathi. The Kadamba script was developed during the reign of the Kadamba dynasty in the 4th-6th centuries. The Kadamba script is also known as **Pre-Old-Kannada script**. This script later became popular in what is today the state of Goa and was used to write Sanskrit, Kannada, Konkani and Marathi.

### **Tamil Script**

It is the script used to write the Tamil language in India and Sri Lanka. It evolved from Grantha, the Southern form of Brahmi. It is a **syllabic language and not alphabetic**. It is written from left to right.

### **Kannada script**

Kannada script is widely used for writing Sanskrit texts in Karnataka. Several minor languages, such as Tulu, Konkani, Kodava, Sanketi and Beary, also use alphabets based on the Kannada script. The **Kannada and Telugu scripts share high mutual intelligibility** with each other, and are often considered to be regional variants of single script.

### **Telugu script**

The Brahmi script used by Mauryan kings eventually reached the Krishna River delta and would give rise to the **Bhattiprolu script** found on an urn purported to contain Lord Buddha's relics. **The Bhattiprolu Brahmi script evolved into the Telugu script** by 5th century C.E.

### **Malayalam script**

The Malayalam script, also known as Kairali script is a Brahmic script used commonly to write Malayalam, which is the principal language of Kerala, India. Malayalam script is also widely used for writing Sanskrit texts in Kerala.

Malayalam was first written in the Vatteluttu alphabet, an ancient script of Tamil. However, the modern Malayalam script evolved from the Grantha alphabet, which was originally used to write Sanskrit. Both Vatteluttu and Grantha evolved from the Brahmi script, but independently.

### **Medieval and Modern scripts**

#### **Urdu script**

The Urdu alphabet is the right-to-left alphabet used for the Urdu language. It is a modification of the Persian alphabet, which is itself a derivative of the Arabic alphabet.

The standard Urdu script is a modified version of the Perso-Arabic script and has its origins in 13th century Iran. It is closely related to the development of the Nastaliq style of Perso-Arabic script.



Urdu script in its extended form is known as Shahmukhi script and is used for writing other Indo-Aryan languages of North Indian subcontinent like Punjabi and Saraiki as well.

### **Santali script**

Santali is a language in the Munda subfamily of Austroasiatic languages, related to Ho and Mundari. Till the nineteenth century Santali remained an oral language.

A recent development has been the creation of a separate **Ol Chiki script** for Santali by **Pt. Raghunath Murmu** in the 1970s which is used exclusively by the Santali speaking people of the Singhbhum Jharkhand and Odisha.

### **Test yourself: Mould your thoughts**

Sanskrit languages claim to be mother of all languages is contested but the Brahmi scripts claim to be the originator of all prominent Indian scripts is uncontested. Critically examine.