

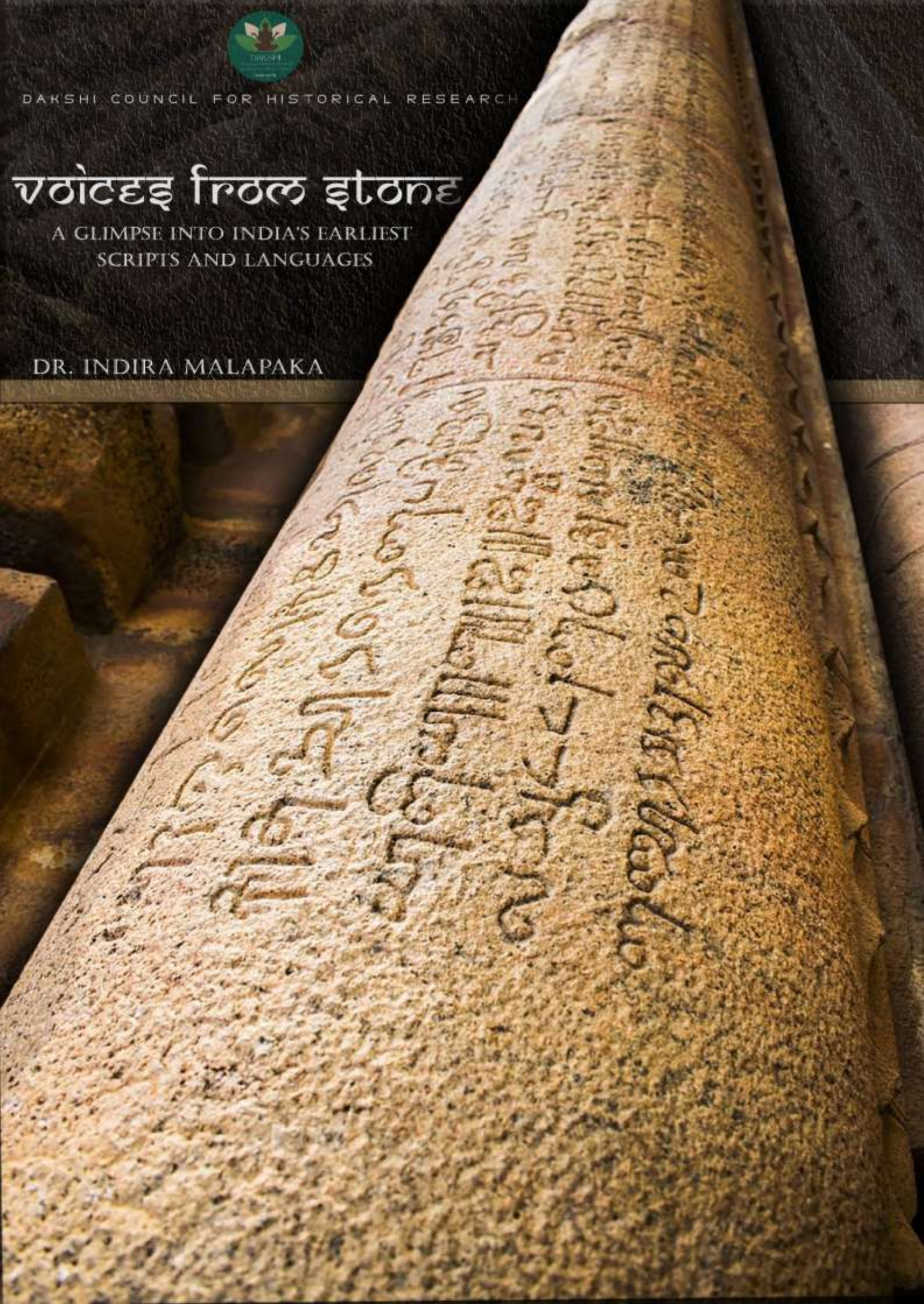


DAKSHI COUNCIL FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

ਚਰਿਟ੍ਰੇਤ੍ਰ ਨਿਰਲ ਇਤਹਾਸ

A GLIMPSE INTO INDIA'S EARLIEST
SCRIPTS AND LANGUAGES

DR. INDIRA MALAPAKA



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Publisher:

DAKSHI Publications

Publications Division of DAKSHI Trust, Dwarka Sector 23B,
New Delhi, 110077

India Tel: +91 7042262289

E-mail: dakshimovement108@gmail.com

Website: www.dakshimovement.in

Price: Rs. 199/-

ISBN: 978-93-343-5561-1

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

DAKSHI is a movement that seeks to reawaken the ancient waiver knowledge systems and Heritage of India. Through this movement we strive to bring back ancient knowledge systems to the modern world. In the chain of this Research work, we in DAKSHI are presenting this wonderful book to you all. As I reflect on the rich tapestry of India's linguistic and scriptural heritage, I am delighted to introduce "The Stone Speaks: Inscriptions and the Indian Languages." This book embarks on a fascinating journey through the dawn of writing in India, presenting a curated selection of the subcontinent's earliest and most pivotal inscriptions.

At DAKSHI, we are committed to exploring and preserving India's cultural legacy. This book is a testament to our dedication to understanding and sharing the stories etched in stone, which have shaped the country's vibrant literary and cultural traditions. The inscriptions highlighted in this book represent significant milestones in India's epigraphical history, chosen for their unique contributions to our understanding of the past. This isn't a complete list, as India's rich archaeological heritage constantly reveals new inscriptions that further enrich the intricate story of its history.

I hope this book will inspire readers to explore the captivating world of Indian epigraphy and appreciate the skill, dedication, and foresight of the ancient artisans who left their mark on stone and metal. "The Stone Speaks" is an invitation to connect with India's ancient past and discover the roots of its enduring legacy.

Akshit Kumar Bhadauria

Director, DAKSHI

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PREFACE

The Stone Speaks: Inscriptions and the Indian Languages

A Glimpse into India's Earliest Scripts and Languages

Welcome to “Voices from Stone,” an edition that embarks on a fascinating journey through the dawn of writing in India. This collection presents a curated selection of some of the subcontinent's earliest and most pivotal inscriptions, offering a concise yet profound insight into the genesis and evolution of its diverse linguistic and scriptural heritage.

In compiling this edition, we faced the immense challenge of distilling millennia of rich history into a brief, accessible format. Thus, our primary consideration has been **conciseness**. Each featured inscription is presented with its core significance highlighted, focusing on why it stands out as a landmark in India's epigraphical narrative. It is crucial to understand that this is a **representative selection, not an exhaustive list**. India's archaeological landscape is vast and continually yielding new discoveries; countless other inscriptions contribute to the intricate tapestry of its past. We've chosen examples that best illustrate key moments in the development of major language families and scripts.

A vital aspect of studying ancient Inscriptions Involves **dating nuances**. The “approximate dates” provided for these records are based on current scholarly consensus, derived from meticulous paleographical analysis, historical correlations, and scientific methods. However, it's important to acknowledge that the definition of “earliest” can sometimes be subject to ongoing scholarly debate and new archaeological finds that may continually push back or refine these timelines. The field of epigraphy is dynamic, with new interpretations and discoveries constantly enriching our understanding.

Furthermore, we must emphasize that **translations of ancient texts are often interpretive**. While scholars strive for accuracy, the nuances of archaic languages, the context of their creation, and the occasional ambiguities of ancient scripts mean that interpretations can vary. The excerpts provided here are intended to give a sense of the original text's character and content, reflecting accepted scholarly translations. Viewing the script as it was meticulously carved by ancient artisans offers a direct connection to the past, enhancing our appreciation for the skill, dedication, and foresight of those who chose to leave their mark on stone and metal.

We hope this edition serves as an engaging introduction to the captivating world of Indian epigraphy, inspiring further exploration into the enduring legacy of India's scripts and languages. These voices from stone remind us that the roots of India's vibrant literary and cultural traditions lie deeply etched in its ancient past.

Dr. Indira Malapaka

Head - Dakshi Council for Historical Research

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We extend our deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed to *Voices from Stone: A Glimpse into India's Earliest Scripts and Languages*.

Firstly, we thank our insightful author Dr. Indira whose diverse perspectives and creative works have enriched our understanding of the complex understanding of Scripts and Languages. Your dedication to exploring these themes through both visual and textual mediums is truly commendable.

We are also immensely grateful to our peer reviewers, whose meticulous feedback and constructive criticism have been invaluable in ensuring the quality and integrity of this publication. Your expertise and commitment to scholarly rigor are deeply appreciated.

Our sincere thanks go to several other epigraphists for the unwavering support, guidance, and tireless efforts in shaping the vision and content of this book. Your collective wisdom and dedication have been instrumental in bringing this issue to fruition.

We acknowledge the support of our Devi, Devtas, Gurus and for their continued Ashirvad to the workings of DAKSHI.

Finally, we express our appreciation to our readers for their continued engagement. We hope this book sparks meaningful conversations and encourage further exploration of the intersections between Scripts, Languages, Stone inscriptions and the ways we perceive and interpret the world around us.

Thank you

Foundational Scripts, Formative Words: A Survey of India's Earliest Linguistic Inscriptions

India, a land of ancient civilizations and profound intellectual traditions, owes much of its documented history to the silent yet eloquent testimony of its inscriptions. The study of these fascinating records, carved on stone, metal, pottery, and other durable materials, forms the bedrock of a specialized academic discipline known as epigraphy. More than just the decipherment of ancient symbols, Indian epigraphy is a multifaceted field that combines linguistics, archaeology, history, art history, and social anthropology to reconstruct the intricate tapestry of the subcontinent's past. It is through the meticulous study of these 'dawn of written records' that we gain unparalleled insights into the political, economic, social, religious, and cultural landscapes of ancient and medieval India.

At its core, epigraphy is the scientific study of inscriptions. This involves several critical stages: discovery and documentation, often through archaeological surveys and careful recording; transcription, where the ancient script is converted into modern readable characters; decipherment, which for unknown scripts or languages, involves linguistic analysis and comparative philology; translation, rendering the text into a contemporary language; and finally, interpretation, placing the inscription within its historical and cultural context. Unlike literary texts, which can undergo multiple recensions and alterations, inscriptions are generally primary, contemporary records, offering direct and often unvarnished evidence from the period they were created. This immediacy imbues them with an unmatched authority for historical reconstruction.

The importance of inscriptions as primary historical sources cannot be overstated. For large swathes of Indian history, particularly the ancient period, inscriptions constitute the most reliable and often the *only* source of information. Unlike perishable manuscripts that may not survive centuries of wear, tear, and deliberate destruction, inscriptions, being carved on durable materials, have a significantly higher chance of longevity. They provide a direct window into the minds of the people who created them, offering insights into their worldview, beliefs, and societal norms. Consider, for instance, the vast corpus of royal charters and land grants found inscribed on copper plates. These records meticulously document grants of land, villages, or revenue rights by kings and chieftains to religious institutions (temples, monasteries) or individuals (Brahmins, officials). They provide invaluable details about administrative divisions, land tenure systems, taxation, the socio-economic status of beneficiaries, and the genealogies of ruling dynasties. Without these records, our understanding of political

succession and administrative structures in many regional kingdoms would be largely speculative. Similarly, eulogistic inscriptions (*praśastis*), often found on pillars or rock faces, offer elaborate accounts of a ruler's conquests, virtues, and pious acts. While these panegyrics must be read critically due to their inherent bias, they nonetheless provide significant historical data on military campaigns, territorial extent, and the ideological foundations of kingship. The Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta, for example, is a cornerstone for reconstructing the history of the Gupta Empire, detailing Samudragupta's extensive military campaigns and his imperial ambitions.

Beyond political and economic history, inscriptions illuminate social and religious history. Donor inscriptions on temple walls or Buddhist stupas reveal patterns of patronage, the names of various guilds and individuals, and their religious affiliations. They shed light on the evolution of religious cults, the construction of religious edifices, and the socio-economic roles of different communities. For example, inscriptions at Sanchi and Bharhut provide crucial information about early Buddhist monastic life and the widespread popular support for the faith. Furthermore, inscriptions are indispensable for linguistic and literary studies. They preserve archaic forms of languages and scripts, tracing their evolution over millennia. The earliest examples of many regional languages – such as Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam – are predominantly found in inscriptions, providing concrete evidence of their development from earlier linguistic stages. They also often contain poetic verses, dramatic fragments, or even musical notations, offering glimpses into ancient literary and artistic traditions.

The evolution of written language in ancient India is a fascinating journey, primarily anchored by two major script families: Brahmi and Kharoshthi. The Brahmi script is undoubtedly the most significant and influential script in Indian epigraphy, often referred to as the "mother of Indian scripts." Its earliest widespread appearance is in the 3rd century BCE, predominantly in the rock and pillar edicts of Emperor Ashoka Maurya. Brahmi is an *abugida*^{*}, where consonant characters inherently carry a vowel sound (usually 'a'), and diacritical marks are used to denote other vowels. It is written from left to right.

abugida^{*} - a type of writing system whose basic characters denote consonants followed by a particular vowel, and in which diacritics denote other vowels".

Over centuries, Brahmi diversified and evolved into nearly all the modern scripts of India, including Devanagari (for Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Nepali), Bengali, Gujarati, Odia,

Gurmukhi, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and even several Southeast Asian scripts like Thai, Khmer, and Javanese. The Ashokan Brahmi, characterized by its elegant, rounded forms, represents a mature stage of development, suggesting an earlier, perhaps less standardized, existence.

In contrast, the Kharoshthi script was primarily confined to the northwestern parts of the Indian subcontinent (modern Pakistan and Afghanistan), a region that had significant interactions with Achaemenid Persia. It emerged around the 3rd or 4th century BCE and faded by the 4th century CE. Unlike Brahmi, Kharoshthi is an abugida written from right to left, a characteristic shared with Aramaic, from which it is believed to have derived. While less widespread than Brahmi, Kharoshthi inscriptions are crucial for understanding the history of the Indo-Greek, Saka, and Kushana rulers, often found on coins and stone inscriptions in the Gandhara region. The bilingual and bi-scriptal coins of Indo-Greek kings (featuring Greek on one side and Prakrit in Kharoshthi on the other) are invaluable for deciphering both scripts.

The contextualization of the emergence of written language in ancient India is complex and subject to ongoing scholarly debate. The earliest evidence of a writing system in India comes from the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600-1900 BCE). The Indus script, found on thousands of seals, pottery, and other artifacts, remains undeciphered. Its linguistic affiliation is unknown, with theories ranging from a proto-Dravidian language to an Indo-Aryan one, or even a non-linguistic system of symbols. While the Indus script represents the dawn of organized written communication in India, its disconnection from later historical scripts like Brahmi presents a significant chronological gap. Following the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization, there is a long period, often referred to as the "dark age" of Indian literacy, spanning over a millennium until the emergence of Brahmi in the 3rd century BCE. The reasons for this gap and the origins of Brahmi are highly debated. Some theories propose an indigenous development of Brahmi, perhaps from an earlier, unrecorded system of symbols, while others suggest a West Semitic origin, possibly through Aramaic, given India's trade contacts. However, the unique phonological adaptations of Brahmi to suit Indian languages, particularly its systematic organization based on phonetic principles, argue strongly for a significant indigenous development or adaptation.

The widespread adoption of Brahmi under Emperor Ashoka suggests a pre-existing familiarity with the script among scribes and administrators across his vast empire. Ashoka's edicts, intentionally placed in public spaces, reflect a sophisticated understanding of the power of written communication for disseminating royal decrees and moral tenets (Dharma). This period marks a pivotal moment: the formal entry of written records into the administrative, religious, and public spheres, laying the foundation for a continuous and rich epigraphic tradition that would span millennia and illuminate the multifaceted history of India. In conclusion, Indian epigraphy is more than just the study of ancient texts; it is a vibrant field that breathes life into the past. The inscriptions, from the enigmatic Indus seals to the eloquent edicts of Ashoka and the later copper plate grants, serve as enduring monuments to human communication and historical memory. They are indispensable for piecing together the political narratives, charting the evolution of languages, understanding societal structures, and appreciating the spiritual and artistic endeavors that have shaped the Indian subcontinent. Through the diligent work of epigraphists, the "dawn of written records" continues to shed light on India's glorious and complex heritage.



Figure 1:Asokan Brahmi inscription

Chapter I

The Proto-Historic Dawn (Indus Script)

The history of writing in the Indian subcontinent begins not with the deciphered scripts of the Maurya period, but with a far more ancient and enigmatic system: the Indus Script. Emerging during the mature phase of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), also known as the Harappan Civilization, this script represents the proto-historic dawn of written communication in India. Flourishing approximately between c. 2500 and 1900 BCE, the Indus script predates the emergence of Brahmi by over a millennium, positioning it as the earliest known writing system on Indian soil. Despite extensive archaeological discoveries and decades of dedicated research, the Indus script remains largely undeciphered, standing as one of the most compelling and enduring mysteries in the field of ancient history and epigraphy. The Indus Script (Undeciphered) presents a unique challenge to scholars. Unlike many other ancient scripts that have been deciphered through bilingual inscriptions (like the Rosetta Stone for Egyptian hieroglyphs) or through known linguistic connections, the Indus script lacks a comparable breakthrough. Its isolation, both geographically and linguistically, from contemporary deciphered scripts like Sumerian cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphs further compounds the problem. Despite the absence of a definitive decipherment, the study of the Indus script offers invaluable insights into the cognitive sophistication of the Harappan people, their administrative practices, trade networks, and possibly their religious and symbolic universe. Its continued investigation is crucial for understanding the earliest attempts at symbolic communication on the subcontinent and provides a tantalizing glimpse into a literate urban civilization that thrived millennia ago.

Discoveries and Distribution of the Indus Script

The first discovery of Indus seals, bearing enigmatic symbols, was made in the late 19th century by Alexander Cunningham, the father of Indian archaeology. However, their true significance as remnants of a forgotten civilization only became apparent with the extensive excavations at Harappa by Dayaram Sahni and at Mohenjo-Daro by R.D. Banerji in the 1920s, which led to the recognition of the vast expanse of the Indus Valley Civilization by John Marshall. Since then, thousands of objects bearing Indus script have been unearthed from over 400 sites, stretching across a vast geographical area encompassing modern-day Pakistan, northwestern India (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh), and parts of Afghanistan and Iran.

The primary forms of example inscriptions are various seals and tablets from Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and Dholavira, though they have also been found on pottery, copper tablets, ivory, and even bangles. The vast majority of these inscriptions are remarkably short, typically comprising 5-6 signs long. The longest inscription found to date contains only 26 signs, a stark contrast to the lengthy royal edicts or literary texts found in other ancient civilizations. This brevity is a significant characteristic and poses a considerable challenge for decipherment, as it limits the scope for identifying grammatical patterns or recurring linguistic structures.

The most iconic objects bearing the script are the steatite seals, rectangular or square in shape, often featuring exquisitely carved animal motifs, such as the famous "unicorn" (a mythical one-horned bovine), humped bull, elephant, tiger, and rhinoceros. These animal depictions are frequently associated with the script, appearing above or alongside the text. In addition to animals, seals occasionally depict human or semi-human figures, and what appear to be ritualistic objects or scenes. The reverse side of many seals has a boss with a perforation, suggesting they were possibly worn or suspended, perhaps for identification or as amulets. Clay tablets (often molded), pottery shards, and copper tablets also bear inscriptions, though less frequently than seals. The monumental signboards found at Dholavira, composed of large gypsum signs, represent a unique form of Indus script display, perhaps indicating a public or symbolic function.

Characteristics and Structure of the Indus Script

Despite its undeciphered status, several structural characteristics of the Indus script have been identified through meticulous analysis:

1. **Direction of Writing:** The most common direction of writing is from right to left. This has been established through the study of overlapping signs, compression of signs at the end of lines, and the overall aesthetic arrangement. Some exceptions exist, with signs written from left to right, or even in a boustrophedon style (alternating directions like an ox plowing a field), though these are rare.
2. **Number of Signs:** Estimates vary, but most scholars agree on approximately 400-450 distinct signs. This number is too large for an alphabet (which typically has 20-40 signs) and too small for a purely logographic script (where each word or morpheme has a unique sign, often numbering in the thousands, like Chinese characters). This suggests that the Indus script is likely a logo-syllabic script (a combination of logograms

representing words/concepts and syllabic signs representing sounds), or perhaps a morphemic-syllabic script.

3. **Frequency of Signs:** Statistical analysis has revealed recurring patterns in sign usage. One of the most frequent signs is the "jar" or "U-shaped" sign, which appears prominently in many inscriptions. Its high frequency suggests it might represent a common word, a grammatical marker, a title, or a numerical unit. Other frequently occurring signs include a "fish" sign, various geometric shapes, and signs resembling human figures or abstract objects.
4. **Compound Signs and Ligatures:** Many signs appear as compound forms, where two or more basic signs are combined. This phenomenon, known as ligaturing, is common in early writing systems and suggests that the script had mechanisms for creating new meanings or refining existing ones through combination.
5. **Lack of Long Texts:** As mentioned, the overwhelming majority of inscriptions are remarkably short. This brevity is a major obstacle to decipherment because it makes it difficult to identify syntax, grammatical rules, or recurring phrases that would help establish a linguistic structure. Unlike Sumerian or Egyptian, where long administrative records, literary texts, or historical accounts provide ample context, the Indus script offers only terse, isolated statements.

Theories of Decipherment and Linguistic Affiliation

The inability to decipher the Indus script has led to numerous hypotheses and passionate debates. Decipherment attempts generally fall into two broad categories based on the presumed linguistic affiliation:

1. **Dravidian Hypothesis:** This is one of the most prominent hypotheses, championed by scholars like Iravatham Mahadevan and Asko Parpola. They argue that the language underlying the Indus script is an early form of Dravidian, a family of languages predominantly spoken in South India today, and which includes Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam. Proponents point to several pieces of evidence:
 - **Survival of Dravidian Languages:** Dravidian languages are the largest indigenous language family in India, with an ancient history.

- **Archaeological Co-occurrence:** The distribution of Dravidian place names in India, especially in regions contiguous with the IVC, is cited.
 - **Linguistic Parallels:** Mahadevan identified potential homophonies (words that sound alike but have different meanings) between Indus signs and Dravidian words. For example, the "fish" sign (Proto-Dravidian *mīn*) could also mean "star" (another *mīn*), suggesting a rebus principle (using a pictogram for a word that sounds like the depicted object).
 - **Absence of Proto-Indo-Aryan:** The chronological gap between the IVC and the arrival of Indo-Aryan languages (as evidenced by the Rigveda) makes it less likely for Indo-Aryan to be the original language of the script.
2. **Indo-Aryan/Sanskrit Hypothesis:** A smaller, though vocal, group of scholars suggests an Indo-Aryan connection. These theories often attempt to link the Indus script to Vedic Sanskrit, arguing for an earlier presence of Indo-Aryans in the subcontinent or a continuity from the IVC to the Vedic period. However, these theories face significant challenges given the strong linguistic and archaeological evidence pointing to a later arrival of Indo-Aryan speakers and the significant differences between the Indus script and later Indo-Aryan linguistic structures.
3. **Other Hypotheses:** Other theories propose that the Indus script might represent:
- **Munda Languages:** A group of Austroasiatic languages spoken in Central and Eastern India.
 - **A Lost Language Family:** A language distinct from both Dravidian and Indo-Aryan, which has no modern descendants.
 - **Not a Language at All:** A radical theory suggests that the Indus script is not a true writing system representing spoken language, but rather a system of symbols, religious iconography, or proto-writing (like mnemonic devices or clan symbols). While the systematic nature and number of signs argue against it being a purely symbolic system, the brevity of inscriptions does lend some credence to the idea that it might not have been a fully developed phonetic script for extensive linguistic expression.



Figure 2: Indus Valley Script

Significance and Implications of the Indus Script

Despite the ongoing mystery of its meaning, the Indus script holds immense significance for understanding the early history of India and the development of human civilization:

1. **Earliest Evidence of Writing in South Asia:** Regardless of its linguistic affiliation, the Indus script undeniably represents the earliest evidence of a writing system in India. Its existence during the mature Harappan phase points to a highly organized, urbanized society with complex administrative, economic, and potentially religious structures that necessitated a system of record-keeping and communication. This places the IVC among the earliest literate civilizations in the world, alongside Mesopotamia and Egypt.
2. **Cognitive and Cultural Sophistication:** The very existence of a systematic script, even if undeciphered, speaks volumes about the cognitive sophistication of the Harappan people. It indicates an advanced level of abstract thought, symbolization, and systematic organization. The consistent use of signs across a vast geographical area suggests a shared cultural understanding and perhaps a degree of centralized authority or widespread cultural exchange.
3. **Economic and Administrative Tool:** The short length of most inscriptions, often found on seals, suggests a primary function related to trade and administration. Seals were

likely used for marking ownership of goods, identifying merchants, or authenticating transactions. They might have been tags attached to bundles of merchandise, ensuring integrity during long-distance trade. The prevalence of seals in cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, major trade hubs, supports this hypothesis. The discovery of Indus seals in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf region further underscores their role in long-distance trade networks, providing direct evidence of commercial interactions between the IVC and other ancient civilizations.

4. **Religious and Symbolic Communication:** The frequent association of the script with animal motifs, particularly the "unicorn" and "pashupati" (lord of animals) seals, suggests a deep connection to religious beliefs, mythology, or ritualistic practices. The animals might represent deities, totems, or symbols with specific religious or mythological significance. The script itself, or certain signs, could have held apotropaic (protective) or ritualistic meaning, beyond mere linguistic representation. The "jar" sign, for instance, might represent a vessel used in rituals or a concept related to abundance or divinity.
5. **Insights into Harappan Society:** While the script's meaning remains elusive, its material context provides clues about Harappan society. The standardization of seals and the presence of script across different socio-economic strata (though perhaps limited to elites or traders) suggest a degree of social hierarchy and organized labor. The script's presence on pottery and other everyday objects also hints at a widespread, if not universally literate, society.
6. **Challenges for Decipherment:** The primary reason the Indus script remains a mystery is the lack of a known language to associate it with, the absence of bilingual texts, and the extreme brevity of the inscriptions. These factors limit the ability to apply standard cryptographic or linguistic statistical methods effectively. Additionally, the lack of substantial archaeological evidence for direct continuity between the IVC and later historical periods, especially in terms of linguistic and scriptural traditions, further complicates decipherment efforts.

The Legacy of the Undeciphered Script

The enigma of the Indus script continues to fascinate and frustrate scholars. While its linguistic affiliation and meaning remain stubbornly out of reach, its study has yielded significant insights into the intellectual and material culture of the Indus Valley Civilization. It stands as a testament

to the Harappan people's ingenuity and their sophisticated attempts at systematic communication. The gap between the Indus script and the emergence of Brahmi poses a profound question: was there any connection, direct or indirect, between these two seemingly disparate writing systems? Most scholars lean towards the idea that Brahmi developed independently, perhaps influenced by external Semitic scripts, rather than directly evolving from the Indus script. The structural differences, particularly the direction of writing and the phonetic nature of Brahmi versus the logographic/syllabic nature of the Indus script, support this view. However, the possibility of some residual cultural memory or symbolic influence cannot be entirely dismissed.

In conclusion, the Indus script, with its hundreds of short inscriptions on seals and tablets, represents the earliest evidence of a writing system in the Indian subcontinent. Flourishing alongside the great urban centers of Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and Dholavira from roughly 2500 to 1900 BCE, it served as a vital tool for the administrative and commercial life of the Indus Valley Civilization, and perhaps also for religious and symbolic expression. Though its linguistic affiliation and precise meaning remain a captivating mystery, its study is absolutely crucial for understanding the cognitive prowess, economic sophistication, and complex cultural landscape of the proto-historic dawn of written records in India. The continued efforts to unlock its secrets promise to reveal even deeper insights into one of the world's earliest and most intriguing literate civilizations.

Chapter II

The Earliest Deciphered Scripts (Brahmi and Kharoshthi)

The transition from the enigmatic, undeciphered script of the Indus Valley Civilization to the transparent, readable scripts of ancient India marks a pivotal moment in the subcontinent's intellectual and historical trajectory. This momentous shift is primarily embodied by the emergence and widespread adoption of two historically significant writing systems: **Brahmi and Kharoshthi**. Unlike the Indus script, these scripts were successfully deciphered in the 19th century, largely through the monumental efforts of James Prinsep, thereby unlocking a vast corpus of historical data and revolutionizing our understanding of ancient India. Among these, **Brahmi stands preeminent, justly celebrated as 'The Mother of Indian Scripts'** due to its foundational role in the genesis of nearly all subsequent scripts of the Indian subcontinent and parts of Southeast Asia.

2.1 Brahmi: The Mother of Indian Scripts

The **Brahmi script**, an ancient Indic script, represents a watershed in Indian epigraphy. Its systematic structure, phonetic precision, and adaptability allowed it to become the bedrock upon which the diverse array of modern Indian scripts are built. Its earliest widespread and securely datable appearance is found in the numerous edicts of Emperor Ashoka Maurya (c. 268-232 BCE), inscribed on rocks and pillars across his vast empire. While the precise origins of Brahmi before Ashoka remain a subject of academic debate, its sophisticated and standardized form in the Ashokan inscriptions suggests a period of prior development and refinement.

Language Family/Script: The language recorded in the earliest Brahmi inscriptions is primarily **Indo-Aryan (Prakrits)**. Prakrits were a group of Middle Indo-Aryan vernaculars spoken in various regions of ancient India, evolving from Old Indo-Aryan (Vedic Sanskrit). Ashoka's edicts, for instance, are inscribed in different regional Prakrit dialects, reflecting the linguistic diversity of his empire. Brahmi is an **abugida**, a segmental writing system in which consonant-vowel sequences are written as a single unit, with the vowel quality modified by diacritics. Each consonant character inherently carries a default vowel, typically /a/, and other vowels are indicated by secondary signs or vowel marks attached to the consonant. This highly phonetic and systematic organization is a hallmark of Brahmi and contributed immensely to its

longevity and derivational power. Brahmi is characteristically written from left to right, a convention maintained by its numerous descendants.

Example Inscription: Ashoka's Minor Rock Edict I (Maski Edict)

Among the multitude of Ashokan edicts, the **Maski Minor Rock Edict I** holds particular historical and epigraphical significance.

- **Approximate Date:** The Ashokan edicts are generally dated to around **c. 257 BCE**, placing them firmly in the mid-3rd century BCE. This period marks the high point of the Mauryan Empire, which under Ashoka, extended its influence across most of the Indian subcontinent.
 - **Location:** The Maski Edict is located in **Maski, Raichur district, Karnataka**, in South India. This southern location is significant as it demonstrates the widespread dissemination of Ashoka's message and the Brahmi script even in regions far from the imperial capital of Pataliputra (modern Patna). Its discovery in 1915 by C. Beadon brought a crucial piece of the Ashokan puzzle into focus.
 - **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt, transliterated and translated from Prakrit):** "Devanampriya Piyadasi raja hevam aha... Sapādhm sata sahāye pi cha me iya athāya dhātu..." (Thus spake* King Devanampriya Piyadasi... Even for a hundred thousand (souls) who were with me in this matter...)
 - **Significance:** The Maski Edict is one of the most historically significant Ashokan inscriptions because it is **the only one among all the major and minor rock and pillar edicts where Emperor Ashoka explicitly refers to himself by his personal name, "Ashoka,"** rather than solely by his regnal titles and epithets such as "Devanampriya" (Beloved of the Gods) and "Piyadasi" (He who looks with affection). This singular self-identification provided the definitive link that allowed scholars to confirm that "Devanampriya Piyadasi" of the inscriptions was indeed Ashoka, the famous Mauryan emperor known from Buddhist literary traditions. Before its discovery, while the edicts were recognized as royal decrees, the identity of the ruler remained a mystery. The Maski inscription thus cemented Ashoka's place in historical records and allowed for the integration of epigraphical and literary sources.
-

spake* - archaic past of speak.

- Beyond this crucial identification, the Maski Edict, like other Minor Rock Edicts, **proclaims the king's fervent commitment to Dharma** (Buddhist principles of righteousness and moral law) and urges his subjects, irrespective of their social standing ("both high and low"), to strive diligently for spiritual progress through the practice of Dharma. It emphasizes the importance of individual effort in achieving spiritual liberation. The inscription also speaks to the king's personal spiritual transformation and his efforts to propagate Dharma throughout his realm, even sending missionaries to distant lands. This edict, therefore, **demonstrates the early widespread use of Brahmi not merely for administrative purposes but as a powerful medium for royal proclamations of moral and spiritual guidance**, reflecting Ashoka's unique role as a "Dharma-king."

Genesis and Evolution of Brahmi

The precise genesis of Brahmi remains a subject of intense scholarly debate. Two primary theories dominate:

1. **Indigenous Origin:** This theory posits that Brahmi developed indigenously within the Indian subcontinent, possibly evolving from an earlier, unattested writing system or a system of symbols, or even influenced by the lost Indus script (though direct links are generally dismissed due to the vast temporal gap and structural differences). Proponents highlight the script's unique phonetic arrangement, which is highly suited to the phonology of Indo-Aryan languages, a feature not readily explained by foreign derivation alone. The systematic derivation of conjunct consonants and vowel marks also suggests an internal, logical development.
2. **Semitic Origin (Adaptation Theory):** This is the more widely accepted theory among many Western scholars. It proposes that Brahmi was adapted from a Semitic script (like Aramaic or Phoenician) around the 6th or 5th century BCE, possibly through trade contacts or administrative interactions with the Achaemenid Persian Empire, which ruled parts of northwestern India. Arguments for this theory include:
 - **Similarities in basic shapes:** A few Brahmi characters show superficial resemblances to Semitic counterparts.

- **Direction of writing:** Early Aramaic was written right-to-left, but later forms adopted left-to-right, which could explain Brahmi's direction.
- **Evidence of Aramaic/Kharoshthi in Northwest:** The presence of Aramaic and Kharoshthi (which is derived from Aramaic) in northwestern India from the 4th century BCE onwards suggests external scriptural influences.

However, the major counter-argument to the Semitic origin theory is the profound structural difference. Semitic scripts are typically abjads (only consonants are written, with vowels inferred), whereas Brahmi is an abugida, a far more sophisticated and systematic phonetic system. This suggests that even if there was external inspiration for some letter forms, the underlying phonetic and grammatical structure of Brahmi was a unique and ingenious Indian innovation, meticulously designed to represent the rich phonology of Indo-Aryan languages. The transition from an abjad to an abugida is a significant evolutionary leap in script development. Regardless of its ultimate origin, by the mid-3rd century BCE, Brahmi had emerged as a fully developed, standardized, and highly efficient writing system. Its uniform appearance across Ashoka's vast empire, from Afghanistan to Karnataka and Gujarat to Odisha, testifies to its widespread acceptance and the presence of a well-organized scribal tradition.

Characteristics and Structure of Brahmi

The structural brilliance of Brahmi lies in its systematic and phonetic design, which sets it apart from many contemporary writing systems:

1. **Abugida System:** As mentioned, Brahmi is an abugida. Each consonant character implicitly carries the short vowel 'a' (e.g., 'k' represents 'ka'). To denote other vowels (i, u, e, o, etc.), diacritical marks are systematically added to the basic consonant character. For example, adding a specific mark to 'k' makes it 'ki', 'ku', 'ke', etc. Independent vowel signs exist for initial vowels (a, ā, i, ī, etc.).
2. **Phonetic Precision:** Brahmi characters are arranged scientifically, reflecting the phonetics of Indo-Aryan languages. The alphabet is organized by the place and manner of articulation (e.g., velars, palatals, retroflexes, dentals, labials; unaspirated, aspirated; voiced, unvoiced). This systematic arrangement, a precursor to the modern Devanagari alphabet, is a testament to the advanced linguistic analysis of ancient Indian scholars.
3. **Conjunct Consonants (Samyuktākṣaras):** Brahmi developed a sophisticated system for writing consonant clusters (e.g., 'kra', 'sta', 'mna'). This was typically achieved by

combining two or more consonant characters, often with the first consonant written partially or as a subscript to the second. This efficient system allowed for the accurate representation of Sanskrit and Prakrit phonology.

4. **Simplicity and Elegance:** The early Brahmi characters are generally simple, geometric, and aesthetically pleasing. Their clarity and distinctiveness made them highly suitable for carving on various surfaces.
5. **Direction of Writing:** Brahmi is consistently written from left to right, a convention that was inherited by almost all its derivatives.

The Proliferation and Legacy of Brahmi

Following the Mauryan period, Brahmi continued to evolve and diversify, leading to the formation of distinct regional variants. This evolution was not haphazard; rather, it reflected linguistic changes, regional aesthetic preferences, and the increasing demand for written communication in different socio-religious contexts.

1. **Early Regional Variants (c. 2nd Century BCE - 3rd Century CE):** Post-Ashokan Brahmi saw the emergence of stylistic variations. Inscriptions from the Sunga, Satavahana, Kalinga (Kharavela), and Kushana periods exhibit subtle changes in letter forms. For instance, the Satavahana Brahmi in the Deccan became more curvilinear, while Kushana Brahmi in the North saw more angular forms. The development of Tamil-Brahmi in South India is a particularly significant regional adaptation, modifying Brahmi signs to represent the unique phonemes of the Tamil language.
2. **Gupta Brahmi (c. 4th - 6th Century CE):** The Gupta period witnessed a significant stylistic transformation of Brahmi. Gupta Brahmi, characterized by its elegant, decorative, and more uniform appearance, became highly influential. It is from Gupta Brahmi that the Siddham script developed, which in turn significantly influenced the evolution of many northern Indian scripts.
3. **Post-Gupta Brahmi and the Emergence of Regional Scripts (c. 6th Century CE onwards):** From the Gupta script, a process of regional differentiation accelerated, leading to the crystallization of distinct script families:
 - **Northern Scripts:** From Siddham and its derivatives, scripts like Sharada (ancestor of Gurmukhi, Dogri, and Kashmiri), Nagari (early form of

Devanagari, ancestor of Hindi, Marathi, Nepali, Konkani), Bengali-Assamese, Odia, and Gujarati began to emerge and develop their unique forms.

- **Southern Scripts:** From the southern variants of Brahmi (e.g., Satavahana Brahmi, early Pallava Grantha), scripts like Grantha (important for writing Sanskrit in Tamil Nadu, ancestor of Tamil script), Vatteluttu (an early script of Tamil and Malayalam), Kannada, and Telugu scripts evolved. These Dravidian scripts share a common Brahmi ancestry but developed distinct visual characteristics.

The enduring legacy of Brahmi lies not just in its direct descendants within India but also in its profound influence on scripts across Asia. Buddhist missionaries, traders, and cultural emissaries carried Brahmi-derived scripts to Southeast Asia, leading to the development of writing systems for languages like Thai, Lao, Burmese, Khmer, Javanese, Balinese, and many others. This widespread diffusion underscores Brahmi's efficiency and adaptability as a vehicle for written communication and cultural transmission.

Brahmi, as the "Mother of Indian Scripts," represents a monumental achievement in the history of writing. Its systematic organization, phonetic precision, and adaptable nature allowed it to transcend linguistic and regional boundaries, providing a unified orthographical framework for the diverse languages of the Indian subcontinent. The Ashokan edicts, particularly the Maski Minor Rock Edict I, serve as powerful testaments to Brahmi's early widespread use and its pivotal role in documenting the imperial policies and moral philosophy of one of India's most significant rulers. The decipherment of Brahmi irrevocably altered our understanding of ancient Indian history, transforming it from a realm of legendary narratives to one illuminated by concrete, contemporary records. Its continued study is not merely an academic exercise but a vital exploration of the linguistic and cultural foundations that have shaped India for millennia, a legacy that continues to resonate in the scripts used by millions today.

2.2 Kharoshthi: The Northwestern Connection

In the vibrant mosaic of ancient Indian epigraphy, while Brahmi emerged as the dominant pan-Indian script, another significant writing system flourished in the northwestern frontier regions of the subcontinent: **Kharoshthi**. This script, contemporary with early Brahmi in its initial stages and later co-existing with its derivatives, represents a crucial "**Northwestern Connection**" in India's linguistic and historical landscape. Unlike Brahmi's widespread and enduring legacy across the entirety of India, Kharoshthi's usage was primarily confined to the

ancient regions of Gandhara (modern-day Pakistan and parts of Afghanistan) and occasionally extending into Central Asia. Its distinctive right-to-left orientation and demonstrable Semitic origins offer a unique lens through which to examine cross-cultural interactions and the socio-political dynamics of a historically volatile yet culturally rich frontier. Kharoshthi is an ancient abugida script that served as a primary medium for written communication in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent's northwest from approximately the 4th century BCE to the 4th century CE. Its relatively short lifespan, compared to Brahmi, was nevertheless impactful, leaving behind a wealth of epigraphical evidence crucial for reconstructing the history of a region that was a melting pot of Indian, Greek, Persian, and Central Asian influences.

Language Family/Script

The language found in Kharoshthi inscriptions is predominantly **Indo-Aryan (Prakrit)**, specifically various northwestern Prakrit dialects, often referred to as Gandhari Prakrit. This dialect exhibits distinct phonological and grammatical features that set it apart from the more easterly Magadhi or Sauraseni Prakrits found in most Brahmi inscriptions. Like Brahmi, Kharoshthi is an **abugida**, where consonants carry an inherent vowel (usually 'a'), and other vowel sounds are indicated by diacritics. However, its most striking characteristic, distinguishing it from Brahmi and virtually all other Indic scripts, is its **right-to-left writing direction**, a feature that strongly points to its foreign origins.

Example Inscription: Taxila Copper Plate of Patika

While not the absolute earliest Kharoshthi inscription, the **Taxila Copper Plate of Patika** serves as an exemplary and well-studied specimen, clearly showcasing the script's presence and its significance in the Indo-Scythian (Saka-Parthian) period.

- **Approximate Date:** The Taxila Copper Plate of Patika is generally dated to **c. 6 CE**, placing it in the early 1st century CE. However, it is important to note that the dating of early Kharoshthi inscriptions, particularly those related to the Indo-Scythian and Kushana rulers, can be complex and subject to scholarly debate, with some alternative interpretations placing it slightly earlier, perhaps in the late 1st century BCE. Its significance, however, remains undiminished as a representative of the script's mature phase.
- **Location:** This significant inscription was discovered at **Sirkap, Taxila**, in modern-day Pakistan. Taxila was an ancient urban center of immense historical importance, serving

as a crossroads for trade routes and cultural exchange between India, Persia, and Central Asia. Its strategic location meant it was a major center for various ruling dynasties, including the Achaemenids, Mauryas, Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Parthians, and Kushanas, all of whom left their mark on its archaeological and epigraphical record.

- **Content/Significance:**

- **Text (Excerpt - transliterated):** "Maharayasa rajatirajasa devaputrasa Khushanasa masasa Gorkhasasa 20 maharajasa rajatirajasa devaputrasa Khushanasa..." (Of the great king, the king of kings, the son of god, Kujula Kadphises, in the 20th year, of the great king, the king of kings, the son of god, Kujula Kadphises...)

Note on the Text: The quoted excerpt above contains the name "Khushanasa" which refers to the Kushana ruler, Kujula Kadphises. While the Taxila Copper Plate of Patika *mentions* the king Patika, the quoted excerpt *itself* seems to conflate with another early Kushana inscription (possibly the Takht-i-Bahi inscription which refers to Kujula Kadphises's 20th year). The Taxila Copper Plate of Patika specifically refers to the great satrap Liaka Kusulaka and his son Patika, and dates to the 78th year of the "era of Azes" (an Indo-Scythian king), corresponding to 18 CE (if the Azes era starts in 58 BCE, a widely accepted theory). It records the establishment of a Buddhist stupa and monastery by Patika.

For academic accuracy regarding the *Taxila Copper Plate of Patika*, a more appropriate transliterated excerpt would be: "Maharajasa rajatirajasa mahantasa Moga-putrasa Liaka-Kusulakasa chhatrapasa Patikasa..." (Of the great king, the king of kings, of the great son of Moga, Liaka Kusulaka, the satrap Patika...)



Figure 3: *Taxila Copper Plate of Patika*

The inscription proceeds to detail a donation made by Patika, son of Liaka Kusulaka (a satrap under the Indo-Scythians), for the establishment of a stupa and a sangharama (monastery) at the site of Sirkap, Taxila. It is dated to the 78th year of an unspecified era, widely accepted as the Azes era (corresponding to 18 CE if the era began in 58 BCE).

- **Significance:** This inscription, even with the clarification of its precise content, **clearly showcases the script's prevalence in the Indo-Greek/Saka-Parthian regions.** It provides direct evidence of the political and religious activities of the Indo-Scythian rulers and their subordinates in Taxila. The plate confirms the presence of Buddhism in the region during this period and the patronage it received from foreign rulers who had adopted Indian cultural practices. Kharoshthi, written right-to-left, was indeed the dominant script in the Northwest, serving as a crucial medium for communication between ruling elites and the local populace. Its study is indispensable for understanding the complex **interactions between Indian and Central Asian cultures**, particularly during the post-Mauryan and Kushana periods. This plate, along with numerous other Kharoshthi inscriptions on coins, reliquaries, and stone slabs, helps reconstruct the chronology of these foreign dynasties, their administrative structures, and their integration into the subcontinent's religious landscape.

Origins and Development of Kharoshthi

Unlike Brahmi, whose origins are debated between indigenous development and Semitic influence, the **Semitic origin of Kharoshthi is widely accepted.** The script is believed to have derived from the **Aramaic script**, which was the lingua franca of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. The Achaemenids conquered parts of northwestern India in the late 6th century BCE (around 520 BCE), and Aramaic was used for administrative purposes in their vast empire. Key arguments for Kharoshthi's Aramaic derivation include:

1. **Direction of Writing:** The most compelling evidence is the consistent **right-to-left writing direction** of Kharoshthi, a characteristic shared with Aramaic and other Semitic scripts. This is a highly unusual feature for an Indic script and a strong indicator of foreign influence.
2. **Similarities in Letter Forms:** Many Kharoshthi characters bear a strong resemblance to their Aramaic counterparts. Scholars like G. Bühler identified several Kharoshthi

letters that could be directly traced to specific Aramaic forms, albeit with adaptations to suit Indic phonology.

3. **Abugida Adaptation:** While Aramaic is an abjad (only consonants written), Kharoshthi adapted the Aramaic forms to create an abugida system, similar to Brahmi. This involved developing diacritics for vowels and creating a system for conjunct consonants. This adaptation suggests a sophisticated understanding of Indic phonetics and the ingenuity of local scribes in molding a foreign script to local linguistic needs.
4. **Geographical and Chronological Fit:** Kharoshthi's prevalence in the northwestern regions, which were under Achaemenid rule, and its emergence around the 4th-3rd centuries BCE aligns well with the period of Aramaic's influence in the region.

The earliest securely datable Kharoshthi inscriptions are found on bilingual Ashokan edicts in Afghanistan (e.g., the Kandahar Bilingual Rock Inscription, where Aramaic and Greek texts are present alongside an Ashokan proclamation). While the main Ashokan edicts throughout India are in Brahmi, the presence of Kharoshthi in the northwest (e.g., Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra Rock Edicts) confirms its early adoption and use alongside Brahmi in that specific geographical sphere.

Characteristics and Usage of Kharoshthi

1. **Right-to-Left Orientation:** This remains the most visually striking and functionally defining characteristic of Kharoshthi. It means that texts begin on the right side of the writing surface and proceed towards the left, with lines typically read from top to bottom.
2. **Abugida System:** Like Brahmi, Kharoshthi is an abugida. Each consonant sign inherently includes the vowel 'a'. Other vowels are indicated by diacritical marks. For example, 'pa' is the basic character, 'pi' and 'pu' are formed by adding specific strokes to the 'pa' character.
3. **Limited Vowel Representation:** Compared to Brahmi, Kharoshthi has a more limited representation of initial vowels and often uses ambiguous signs for certain vowel sounds. It also has a simpler system for conjunct consonants.
4. **Linguistic Features (Gandhari Prakrit):** Kharoshthi was primarily used to write Gandhari Prakrit, which had specific phonetic characteristics. For instance, the retroflex

'ṣ' (ś) and 'ṇ' (n) found in Sanskrit and other Prakrits were often replaced by their dental counterparts 's' and 'n' in Gandhari. This linguistic nuance is reflected in the script.

5. **Simpler Character Set:** Kharoshthi generally has fewer characters than Brahmi (around 37 basic signs plus ligatures), reflecting a potentially simpler phonological inventory of the Gandhari dialect or perhaps a less systematic approach to phonetic precision compared to Brahmi.
6. **Material Usage:** Kharoshthi inscriptions are found on a variety of materials:
 - **Coins:** Kharoshthi is most extensively found on the legends of Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian, and early Kushana coinage. These bilingual and bi-scriptal coins (Greek on the obverse, Kharoshthi on the reverse) were instrumental in its decipherment.
 - **Stone Inscriptions:** Royal edicts, donor inscriptions, and commemorative texts are found on rocks and stelae, though less numerous than Brahmi stone inscriptions.
 - **Reliquaries:** Buddhist reliquaries made of gold, silver, or copper often bear Kharoshthi inscriptions, typically recording dedications.
 - **Birch Bark Manuscripts:** A remarkable discovery, the Gandhari Buddhist texts written on birch bark scrolls (found near Hadda in Afghanistan, dating from 1st century BCE to 2nd century CE) represent the only extensive literary corpus in Kharoshthi. These manuscripts are invaluable for understanding early Buddhist literature and the Gandhari language.

Role in Cross-Cultural Interactions

Kharoshthi's prevalence in the northwest makes it a unique witness to the dynamic cross-cultural interactions that characterized this frontier region:

1. **Indo-Greek Kingdoms:** Following Alexander the Great's campaigns, Greek kingdoms were established in Bactria and India. Their coinage, often bilingual and bi-scriptal, used Greek on one side and Prakrit in Kharoshthi on the other. This fusion demonstrates the pragmatic need to communicate with the local population and represents an early example of cultural syncretism. The decipherment of Kharoshthi was significantly

aided by these coins, as scholars could compare the known Greek legends with the unknown Kharoshthi ones.

2. **Saka-Parthian and Kushana Empires:** Successive waves of Central Asian invaders—the Sakas (Scythians), Parthians, and Kushanas—adopted Kharoshthi as a primary administrative and religious script. The Taxila Copper Plate of Patika exemplifies this, as it is a record by a Saka satrap. The early Kushana rulers, like Kujula Kadphises, also used Kharoshthi extensively on their coinage, even as they transitioned to Greek and eventually Bactrian for their later inscriptions. The **Mathura Lion Capital inscription**, another crucial Kharoshthi text, details donations by Saka rulers and their queens, shedding light on their patronage of Buddhism and Jainism.
3. **Spread of Buddhism:** Kharoshthi was instrumental in the early spread of Buddhism from India into Central Asia and eventually China. The Gandhari Buddhist texts on birch bark, written in Kharoshthi, are the earliest surviving Buddhist manuscripts in any Indic language. They demonstrate the transmission of Buddhist knowledge along the Silk Road and provide invaluable insights into early Buddhist sects and their literary traditions. The adoption of Kharoshthi by these Buddhist communities facilitated the dissemination of the Dharma across a vast geographical expanse.
4. **Linguistic and Artistic Influences:** The northwest was a melting pot, and Kharoshthi inscriptions reflect this. They provide evidence of linguistic contact and the development of unique artistic styles (e.g., Gandhara art, which fused Hellenistic and Indian elements). The very choice of Kharoshthi over Brahmi in this region highlights a cultural orientation that looked westward, towards Persia and Central Asia, even while absorbing Indian religious and philosophical ideas.

Decline and Disappearance

Kharoshthi's prominence began to wane from the 3rd century CE onwards, and it largely disappeared by the 4th or 5th century CE. Several factors contributed to its decline:

1. **Rise of Brahmi:** As the political power shifted towards more easterly Indian dynasties (like the Guptas), Brahmi and its derivatives gained increasing prominence. Brahmi offered a more systematic and linguistically precise way to represent the full range of Sanskrit and Prakrit phonemes.

2. **Political Changes:** The decline of the Kushana Empire and the rise of new powers in the northwest, coupled with changes in trade routes and cultural alignments, may have contributed to the obsolescence of Kharoshthi.
3. **Linguistic Shift:** The Gandhari Prakrit, which Kharoshthi primarily wrote, also began to give way to other Prakrit dialects and ultimately to Sanskrit, which was increasingly adopted as a language of prestige and administration.
4. **Preference for Sanskrit and Brahmi:** With the growing prestige of Sanskrit as a literary and religious language and the continued evolution of Brahmi into highly sophisticated regional scripts, Kharoshthi gradually became obsolete. Its unique right-to-left orientation may have also been a factor, as it stood apart from the dominant left-to-right writing tradition emerging across the rest of the subcontinent.

Kharoshthi, the "Northwestern Connection," represents a fascinating chapter in the history of Indian epigraphy. As an Aramaic-derived abugida, written from right to left, it stands in stark contrast to the indigenous Brahmi script, yet both flourished concurrently for several centuries. Its study is indispensable for understanding the complex cultural crucible of the Indo-Afghan frontier, a region that witnessed the ebb and flow of empires and the vibrant fusion of diverse civilizations. The Taxila Copper Plate of Patika, among numerous other Kharoshthi inscriptions on coins, stone, and even fragile birch bark, vividly showcases the script's pivotal role in documenting the political activities, religious patronage (especially of Buddhism), and daily life of the Indo-Greek, Saka, Parthian, and early Kushana rulers. It serves as a tangible link between ancient India, Central Asia, and the broader Hellenistic world. Though its period of prominence was shorter than Brahmi's, Kharoshthi's legacy lies in the unique insights it provides into a dynamic frontier, a testament to the fluid and interconnected nature of ancient world civilizations. Its decipherment not only unlocked a significant corpus of historical data but also highlighted the intricate ways in which writing systems adapt and evolve in response to profound cultural and political encounters.

Chapter III

Early Dravidian Language Inscriptions

The rich linguistic landscape of the Indian subcontinent is characterized by two major language families: Indo-Aryan and Dravidian. While the earliest deciphered inscriptions of the North primarily showcase Indo-Aryan languages (Prakrits and later Sanskrit) written in Brahmi and Kharoshthi, the South boasts its own distinct and equally ancient tradition, evidenced by the **Early Dravidian Language Inscriptions**. Among these, the inscriptions in **Tamil-Brahmi** stand as monumental testaments to **Tamil's Ancient Voice**, pushing the written history of one of the world's longest-surviving classical languages back to the pre-Christian era. These epigraphs, found primarily in natural caverns and rock shelters across Tamil Nadu, unveil not only the formative stages of the Tamil language and script but also shed light on early religious practices, patronage patterns, and socio-economic structures of the Sangam Age.

3.1. Tamil-Brahmi: Tamil's Ancient Voice

The advent of the **Tamil-Brahmi script** marks a crucial chapter in the history of Dravidian languages, particularly Tamil. While the broader Brahmi script permeated much of India during the Mauryan period, its adaptation to the unique phonology of Tamil, a non-Indo-Aryan language, resulted in a distinctive Southern variant. This specialized adaptation is crucial for understanding the independent trajectory of Dravidian linguistic and scriptural development.

Language Family/Script

The language of these inscriptions is **Dravidian (Old Tamil)**, the earliest attested form of Tamil. The script employed is **Tamil-Brahmi**, a modified version of the Brahmi script specifically engineered to represent the phonemes unique to the Tamil language. The standard Brahmi alphabet, developed primarily for Indo-Aryan Prakrits, lacked signs for certain Dravidian sounds (e.g., retroflex 'ɻ', alveolar 'ɽ', and the short 'e' and 'o' distinction). Tamil-Brahmi innovatively addressed these deficiencies by either adding new symbols or modifying existing Brahmi signs, demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of Tamil phonology. Like its northern counterpart, Tamil-Brahmi is an abugida, where consonants carry an inherent vowel (typically 'a'), and diacritics are used to indicate other vowels. It is generally written from left to right.

Example Inscription: Mangulam Inscription (Lower Caverns)

The **Mangulam Inscription**, found in the natural caverns near Madurai, stands as one of the most celebrated and pivotal examples of Tamil-Brahmi, providing invaluable insights into the early history of the Tamil language and its socio-religious context.

- **Approximate Date:** The Mangulam Inscription is generally dated to **c. 2nd-1st Century BCE**. This dating places it squarely within the early Sangam period, a vibrant era of Tamil literature and cultural florescence. Archaeological and paleographical evidence, including stratigraphic finds and comparative analyses with other early Brahmi scripts, support this chronological placement.
- **Location:** The inscription is located in the **lower caverns of Mangulam**, a village in the Madurai district of Tamil Nadu. The Madurai region, historically the seat of the Pandya kingdom, was a significant political and cultural hub during the Sangam Age. The choice of natural caverns as inscription sites is typical for early Jain and Buddhist ascetics who sought secluded places for meditation and residence.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - transliterated Old Tamil, with a simplified interpretation):**
 "Kaṇiyāṇ naṭṭiyāṇ perumāy pāṇṭiyāṇ" (The Naṭṭiyār of Kaṇi, the Perumāya of Pāṇṭiyār)

More nuanced interpretations of the Mangulam inscription (from Iravatham Mahadevan and others) often read: "Kaṇi Nantaśirikuvan kaṭavōṇ Kuvaṇ mātēvi Perumakaḷ Pāṇṭiyaṇ" (The stone bed for Kuvan, the great female ascetic of Kani Nandasirikuvan, by the Pandya king) - (This is one of several interpretations, indicating the complexities of deciphering early Tamil-Brahmi).

Another well-known reading for one of the Mangulam inscriptions, famously attributed to Neduncheliyan, a Pandya king: "Kaṇiyāṇ naṭṭiyāṇ perumāy pāṇṭiyāṇ Kaṭalaṇ Valuti koṭupitavāṇ" (The cave [rock bed] of Kaṇiyāṇ, given by Valuti of Kaṭalaṇ, the Pandya king)

- **Significance:** The Mangulam inscriptions are among the **earliest undisputed evidences of the Tamil language in written form**. Their significance is multi-faceted:

- **Linguistic Evidence:** They provide concrete linguistic data for Old Tamil, showcasing its phonetic, morphological, and syntactic features from an early period. The presence of distinct Tamil phonemes and grammatical structures within the Brahmi framework demonstrates the language's long independent history and its ability to adapt external writing systems.
- **Scriptural Adaptation:** The unique adaptations of Brahmi to Tamil phonology – the creation of new signs for specific retroflex consonants and the differentiation of short 'e' and 'o' vowels – highlight the ingenuity of ancient Tamil scribes. This localized modification process underscores the dynamic interaction between language and script.
- **Religious Patronage:** These inscriptions **typically record donations of rock-cut beds (palli) to Jain monks** by individuals, chieftains, or kings. This reveals the significant presence and influence of Jainism in ancient Tamil Nadu during the Sangam period. The caves served as natural shelters or monastic residences for Jain ascetics, and the practice of carving beds reflects a form of religious charity.
- **Socio-Economic Insights:** The names of donors often include titles or affiliations, providing insights into early **social structures and patronage patterns**. The mention of a "Pandya king" in some Mangulam inscriptions is particularly significant, confirming the historical existence and early power of the Pandya dynasty, which was a dominant force in the Sangam Age. This links epigraphical evidence with information found in classical Tamil literature.
- **Archaeological Context:** The inscriptions are found in natural caverns, which were modified to create simple monastic dwellings. This archaeological context helps us understand the ascetic lifestyle of early Jain monks and their interaction with the lay community.

Origins and Development of Tamil-Brahmi

The origins of Tamil-Brahmi are intrinsically linked to the broader Brahmi script. While the exact mechanism of its arrival in South India remains debated, it is widely believed that Brahmi

arrived in Tamil Nadu from North India during the Mauryan period, possibly through Buddhist or Jain missionaries or traders. However, the Tamil-Brahmi script is not merely a copy of Ashokan Brahmi; it represents a sophisticated adaptation. Key aspects of its development:

1. **Adaptation to Tamil Phonology:** The most striking feature of Tamil-Brahmi is its modification to accurately represent Tamil sounds that were absent in Prakrit. For example:
 - **Retroflex 'l' (𑌚):** A unique retroflex lateral approximant sound in Tamil, represented by a distinct sign.
 - **Alveolar 'r' (𑌛):** An alveolar trill, also given a unique sign.
 - **Short 'e' and 'o' (𑌜, 𑌝):** Unlike standard Brahmi, which did not distinguish between long and short 'e' and 'o' vowels, Tamil-Brahmi introduced distinct symbols for these crucial Tamil phonemes.
 - **Pulli (Dot Mark):** Crucially, Tamil-Brahmi innovated the "pulli" (dot mark) placed above a consonant to indicate the absence of an inherent vowel, making the consonant a pure consonant (e.g., 'k' without 'a'). This innovation was a significant advancement, allowing for the precise representation of Tamil's consonant-ending words and clusters, a feature fundamentally different from the vowel-ending nature of Prakrits. This "pulli" system directly influenced the later development of the Tamil script and remains a core feature.
2. **Chronological Phases:** Scholars have identified various paleographical phases in Tamil-Brahmi, indicating its evolution over time.
 - **Early Phase (c. 3rd-2nd Century BCE):** Closest to Ashokan Brahmi, with some adaptations.
 - **Middle Phase (c. 1st Century BCE - 1st Century CE):** More pronounced Tamil characteristics, including the standardized use of 'pulli' and unique signs.
 - **Late Phase (c. 2nd-4th Century CE):** Further stylistic evolution, transitioning towards later Tamil scripts.
3. **Spread and Distribution:** Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions are found across Tamil Nadu, with major concentrations in the Madurai, Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram, and

Coimbatore districts. They are predominantly found in natural rock shelters (kudaguhaigal) and caves, reflecting their association with Jain ascetics. However, Tamil-Brahmi has also been found on pottery, coins, and occasionally on rings and seals, indicating its broader application beyond monastic records. Notably, Tamil-Brahmi pottery shards have been found in archaeological excavations as far afield as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Egypt (Quseir al-Qadim), testifying to ancient Tamil maritime trade networks.



Figure 4: Potsherd with Tamil-Brahmi characters.

Content and Societal Insights from Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions

The content of Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, though terse, offers invaluable glimpses into the early history of Tamilakam (the ancient Tamil country):

1. **Religious Patronage:** The overwhelming majority of these inscriptions record gifts of rock-cut beds to Jain monks. This suggests that Jainism was a prominent religious force in ancient Tamil Nadu, enjoying considerable patronage from various sections of society, including royalty, chieftains, merchants, and commoners. The simplicity of these monastic dwellings reflects the austere principles of Jainism.
2. **Social Hierarchy and Occupations:** The donor information often includes personal names, titles, and occupations, providing insights into the social fabric. We find mentions of:
 - **Kings (Kō, Perumakal):** As seen in the Mangulam inscription, confirming royal patronage.

- **Chieftains (Atiyan, Vel):** Local rulers or magnates.
 - **Merchants (Vaṇikan):** Indicating the presence of a thriving mercantile class.
 - **Goldsmiths, Carpenters, Stone Cutters (Taṭṭan, Karkān, etc.):** Suggesting various professional guilds and the contributions of artisans.
 - **Lay Devotees:** Simple individuals making donations out of piety.
3. **Linguistic Insights:** Beyond proving the antiquity of written Tamil, these inscriptions are a goldmine for Old Tamil linguistic studies. They preserve archaic vocabulary, grammatical structures, and phonetic forms that are crucial for tracing the evolution of the Tamil language. The unique adaptations for Tamil phonemes are direct evidence of linguistic analysis by early Tamil grammarians or scribes.
 4. **Geographical and Political Information:** The names of places and rulers mentioned in the inscriptions help in mapping ancient territories and confirming the existence of specific dynasties and chieftains, often corroborating information found in Sangam literature.
 5. **Continuity with Sangam Literature:** The Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions provide an external, epigraphical validation for many aspects of the Sangam literature. The mention of Pandya kings, chieftains, and social groups in the inscriptions resonates with the themes and characters found in the Sangam poems, suggesting a historical continuity between these two significant sources of ancient Tamil history.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the breakthroughs in decipherment and interpretation, the study of Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions still presents challenges:

1. **Brevity:** Like the Indus script, Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions are generally very short, limiting the amount of linguistic and historical data they can provide individually. Reconstructing a comprehensive picture requires piecing together information from numerous fragments.
2. **Variability in Interpretation:** Given the age and brevity, some inscriptions still have multiple possible readings and interpretations among scholars, especially regarding names and specific terms.

3. **Limited Scope:** The overwhelming focus on Jain monastic donations means that these inscriptions provide a specific, rather than a panoramic, view of ancient Tamil society. Information on administration, warfare, or broader economic activities is less explicit.

Future research in Tamil-Brahmi continues to focus on:

- **Discovery of New Inscriptions:** Ongoing archaeological explorations may unearth new inscriptions, potentially providing longer texts or different contexts.
- **Refined Paleographical Analysis:** Detailed study of stylistic evolution of characters can lead to more precise dating.
- **Comparative Linguistic Studies:** Deeper comparative analyses with other Dravidian languages and Indo-Aryan Prakrits can further illuminate the linguistic context.
- **Integration with Archaeology:** Closer integration of epigraphical findings with archaeological data from habitation sites, trade routes, and urban centers can provide a richer contextual understanding.

The Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions represent a monumental achievement in the history of the Dravidian linguistic tradition. They are not merely records etched on stone; they are **Tamil's Ancient Voice**, resonating across millennia to tell the story of a vibrant civilization. Dating back to the 2nd-1st century BCE, these cave inscriptions, exemplified by those at Mangulam, provide the earliest tangible evidence of the Tamil language in written form, a language that continues to thrive as one of the world's classical tongues. The ingenious adaptation of the Brahmi script to accommodate the unique phonology of Old Tamil, particularly the development of the 'pulli' and new signs for specific retroflex sounds, underscores the linguistic sophistication of ancient Tamil scribes. These terse yet invaluable records primarily document the patronage of Jain monks through donations of rock-cut beds, thereby offering critical insights into early religious practices and the social dynamics of the Sangam Age. By illuminating the interaction between early Tamil language, script, religion, and society, the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions stand as indispensable primary sources, not only for the history of Tamil Nadu but also for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and ancient literary and epigraphical traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Their decipherment has opened a profound window into a significant phase of South Indian history, allowing us to connect the dots between archaeological findings, literary traditions, and the living legacy of the Tamil language.

3.2 Early Kannada: The Beginnings of Karnataka's Language

The rich tapestry of Indian languages is woven with threads of diverse origins, each with its unique historical trajectory. Within the Dravidian family, after Tamil, **Kannada** holds a distinguished position with an ancient literary and epigraphical heritage. The emergence of **Early Kannada** in its written form marks the **beginnings of Karnataka's language**, providing invaluable insights into the linguistic, political, and socio-cultural evolution of the Deccan region. These early inscriptions, characterized by their unique script and content, serve as primary sources for understanding the formative period of Kannada, bridging the gap between its proto-Dravidian roots and its mature literary expressions. Among these, the **Halmidi Inscription** stands as a landmark, widely recognized as the earliest full-length inscription in the Kannada language, a testament to the language's independent development.

Early Kannada: The Beginnings of Karnataka's Language

The early history of the Kannada language, like that of other Dravidian languages, is rooted in the common Proto-Dravidian linguistic ancestor. However, the distinct identity of Kannada as a separate language with its own unique phonology, morphology, and syntax began to crystallize over centuries. The epigraphical records are the most reliable witnesses to this evolutionary process, offering concrete evidence of Kannada's transition from an oral tradition to a codified written form.

Language Family/Script

The language of these early records is **Dravidian (Old Kannada)**, representing the initial phase of the Kannada language, distinct from later forms like Middle Kannada and Modern Kannada. The script employed is the **Early Kannada Script**, which evolved from the southern branches of Brahmi. This script, often referred to as the **Kadamba script** or **Western Ganga style**, exhibits characteristics that are ancestral to the later well-developed Kannada script. It shares common features with early Telugu scripts (leading to the combined term "Old Kannada-Telugu script" for some early phases) but also displays nascent features that would later define the distinct Kannada orthography. As an abugida, it adheres to the principle of a basic consonant carrying an inherent vowel, with diacritics for other vowel modifications. It is typically written from left to right.

Example Inscription: Halmidi Inscription

The **Halmidi Inscription** holds a pre-eminent position in the study of early Kannada epigraphy and linguistic history. Its discovery and subsequent dating have provided a firm chronological anchor for the written history of Kannada.

- **Approximate Date:** The Halmidi Inscription is generally dated to **c. 450 CE**. This dating is based on paleographical analysis, comparing its script style with other dated inscriptions of the period, particularly those of the Kadamba dynasty. This early dating places it firmly in the mid-5th century CE, making it a crucial benchmark for the antiquity of the Kannada language.
- **Location:** The inscription was discovered in the village of **Halmidi, located in the Hassan district of Karnataka**. Hassan is a district rich in historical sites and has been a significant cultural and administrative center in various periods of Karnataka's history. The location of the inscription in the heartland of Karnataka underscores its local origin and significance for the region's linguistic identity.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - transliterated Old Kannada):** "Jayanti Lokadhātuva rājasya, śrī-Mṛgēśana jayanāda paṭṭiyārākatti..." (Victorious is the Lokadhātuva of the king, the victory of Mṛgēśa was tied to the Paṭṭiyāra...)

A more comprehensive and widely accepted transliteration and translation of the opening portion of the Halmidi inscription reveals its specific content as a grant deed: "jayaṁti vīra śrīkaṭṭibhaṭṭara... || śrīmṛgēśa nālākatti... | sūramukha paṭṭiyārā... | āvura-raḍamga paṭṭiyāram | imdrakīya bhōgakām... | āḍa-mācama samjāgam | paṭṭiyarāvaṭṭi gaṁgaśrī-bhūmi-viśālāyām..." (Victorious is the glorious warrior Śrī Kaṭṭibhaṭṭa... || At the time of the glorious Mṛgēśa... | Sūramukha, the Paṭṭiyāra... | Paṭṭiyāra of the two sides of Āvura... | the enjoyment of Indrakiya... | the companion of Āḍamācama... | the village of Paṭṭiyarāvaṭṭi, in the vast land of Gaṁgaśrī...)

The inscription proceeds to detail a land grant made by the Kadamba king Kakusthavarma to a warrior (or warriors) for their bravery and service in battle. It describes the valor of the warrior(s) in a conflict against the Pallegaras.

- **Significance:** The Halmidi Inscription is widely considered **the earliest full-length Kannada inscription**. While there might be a few earlier scattered words or phrases in Kannada on other artifacts, this inscription represents a coherent, complete text, marking a **crucial stage in the evolution of the**

Kannada language from its proto-Kannada forms to a more developed and distinct linguistic entity. Its significance is multi-faceted:

- **Linguistic Milestone:** It provides concrete evidence of a well-formed Old Kannada language with its own grammatical structures, vocabulary, and phonetic features, distinct from earlier Prakrit or Sanskrit influences. The inscription showcases the use of specific Kannada morphological markers and syntax, providing valuable data for historical linguists.
- **Scriptural Development:** The script of the Halimidi inscription, falling within the Kadamba style of Early Kannada, displays characteristics that are transitional from Brahmi but show nascent features of the Kannada script that would later fully differentiate from the Telugu script. It thus serves as a key marker in the paleographical evolution of Kannada.
- **Historical Record:** The inscription records a **grant of land to a warrior for his bravery in battle**. This act of royal patronage provides significant insights into the **early political and social customs** of the Kadamba dynasty, a powerful early kingdom in Karnataka. It highlights the importance of military service and the system of rewarding loyal subjects with land grants, which was a common practice in ancient Indian polities.
- **Socio-Political Context:** It helps reconstruct the socio-political landscape of the mid-5th century CE in Karnataka. The mention of specific kings (Kadamba Kakusthavarma), warriors, and land disputes paints a picture of the power dynamics and administrative practices of the time.
- **Literary Precursor:** While not a literary work itself, the structured language and formal tone of the Halimidi inscription suggest a growing sophistication in Kannada prose, laying the groundwork for the rich literary tradition that would flourish in subsequent centuries (e.g., the Kavirajamarga in the 9th century).

Evolution of Early Kannada Script (Kadamba/Western Ganga Style)

The **Early Kannada Script**, as seen in the Halmidi inscription and other contemporary records, developed from the southern branches of Brahmi.



Figure 5: Halmidi inscription in Kannada Script

This evolution was not a sudden transformation but a gradual process influenced by various factors:

1. **Southern Brahmi Influence:** The Brahmi script, which spread to South India during the Mauryan period, formed the foundation. Over time, regional stylistic variations emerged. The Brahmi found in Satavahana inscriptions of the Deccan, characterized by its curvilinear forms, likely played a significant role in the development of Kannada script.

2. **Kadamba and Western Ganga Styles:** The Kadambas (c. 345-540 CE) and later the Western Gangas (c. 350-1000 CE) were powerful dynasties in Karnataka, and their patronage fostered the development of distinct script styles. The Kadamba script, known for its elegant, somewhat rounded letters with elaborate flourishes at the top (often resembling small boxes or ornamental heads), is distinct and recognizable. The Western Ganga script, while sharing similarities, also developed its own characteristics. The Halmidi inscription falls within **this** early Kadamba stylistic tradition.
3. **Differentiation from Telugu Script:** Early Kannada and Telugu scripts share a common ancestral script derived from southern Brahmi, leading to them often being grouped as "Old Kannada-Telugu script" in their nascent stages. However, by the 5th-6th centuries CE, distinct features began to emerge. The Kadamba script, particularly from the 5th century, shows clear divergences that would eventually lead to the fully independent Kannada script. These differences became more pronounced with the Badami Chalukyas (6th-8th century CE) and Rashtrakutas (8th-10th century CE), whose inscriptions solidified the unique forms of both Kannada and Telugu scripts.
4. **Key Paleographical Features:**
 - **Heads of Letters:** Early Kannada scripts often feature a distinct 'box' or 'head' at the top of the characters, which became less prominent or evolved differently in later stages.
 - **Curvilinear Forms:** While maintaining some angularity, the script generally developed more rounded and curvilinear forms compared to some northern Brahmi derivatives.
 - **Vowel Marks:** The system of adding diacritics for vowels remained consistent with the abugida principle, though the precise forms of these marks evolved.
 - **Conjunctive Consonants:** The method of forming consonant clusters (samyuktākṣaras) also underwent development, becoming more sophisticated over time.

Context and Other Early Kannada Inscriptions

While the Halmidi inscription holds pride of place as the earliest full-length text, its context is enriched by other early Kannada inscriptions that provide additional linguistic and historical data.

1. **Talagunda Inscription (c. 450 CE):** This inscription, primarily in Sanskrit, has a few Kannada phrases or sentences embedded within it. It describes the Kadamba king Kakusthavarma and his minister. While not a fully Kannada inscription, its contemporaneity with Halmidi and the presence of Kannada elements indicate the language's active use.
2. **Chikkamagala Inscription (c. 445 CE):** Some scholars consider this earlier than Halmidi, though it is shorter and fragmented. It is a stone inscription mentioning a land grant and uses early Kannada.
3. **Gundigere Inscription (c. 4th-5th Century CE):** Another fragmented inscription with early Kannada elements.
4. **Badami Cave Inscriptions (c. 6th Century CE):** While slightly later than Halmidi, the inscriptions in the Badami cave temples of the Chalukyas feature a more evolved form of Old Kannada script and language. These include both prose and poetic verses, showcasing a greater linguistic sophistication. For example, the Kappe Arabhatta inscription at Badami (c. 700 CE) is a significant early Kannada poem.

These inscriptions collectively demonstrate that by the 5th and 6th centuries CE, Kannada was a fully functional written language, capable of expressing administrative, religious, and even rudimentary poetic content. Its emergence during the rule of powerful dynasties like the Kadambas and Western Gangas suggests state patronage and a growing administrative need for written communication in the vernacular.

Significance for Linguistic and Literary History

The early Kannada inscriptions, particularly Halmidi, are fundamental to the reconstruction of Kannada's linguistic and literary history:

1. **Tracing Linguistic Evolution:** They provide concrete evidence of Kannada's phonetic and grammatical features during its formative stages, allowing linguists to trace its evolution from Proto-Dravidian. Features such as the presence of certain case endings, verb conjugations, and vocabulary can be analyzed.

2. **Dating Literary Works:** The existence of a well-formed written Kannada by the 5th century CE provides a crucial chronological anchor for dating later literary works. It indicates that the language was ready to support complex literary compositions. The gap between the Halmidi inscription and the 9th-century *Kavirajamarga* (the earliest extant Kannada literary work on poetics) suggests a period of significant literary activity, much of which might have been on perishable materials.
3. **Independent Identity of Kannada:** These inscriptions firmly establish Kannada as an independent Dravidian language with its own written tradition, distinct from Tamil and Telugu, even while acknowledging shared Dravidian heritage. The unique script evolution further solidifies this independent identity.
4. **Cultural and Social Insights:** The content of these inscriptions offers a window into the cultural and social values of early Karnataka. The emphasis on valor, land grants, religious donations (often to Jainism and later Shaivism/Vaishnavism), and the details of local administration paint a vibrant picture of life in the Deccan.

Challenges in Studying Early Kannada Epigraphy

1. **Scarcity of Early Records:** Compared to later periods, the number of extant early Kannada inscriptions is relatively small, making it challenging to build a comprehensive linguistic corpus for detailed analysis.
2. **Fragmentary Nature:** Many early inscriptions are fragmented or partially damaged, making full reconstruction and interpretation difficult.
3. **Overlapping with Sanskrit and Prakrit:** Early Kannada inscriptions often contain Sanskrit words or phrases, or are bilingual, requiring careful linguistic differentiation to isolate pure Kannada elements.
4. **Paleographical Variations:** Subtle variations in script styles across different dynasties and regions require specialized paleographical expertise for accurate dating and attribution.

Despite these challenges, the meticulous work of epigraphists and linguists continues to unlock the secrets held within these ancient stones.

The **Early Kannada inscriptions**, epitomized by the **Halmidi Inscription of c. 450 CE**, represent the seminal **beginnings of Karnataka's language** in its written form. Found in the

heartland of the ancient Kadamba kingdom, this inscription stands as the earliest full-length testament to the Kannada language, showcasing its distinct identity as it evolved from its Proto-Dravidian roots. The script, often referred to as the Kadamba or Western Ganga style, provides crucial paleographical evidence for the independent development of the Kannada script from its Brahmi antecedents. Beyond its linguistic significance, the Halmidi inscription's content—a land grant to a warrior for his bravery—offers invaluable insights into the early political and social customs of the 5th-century Deccan. It highlights the patronage systems of powerful dynasties like the Kadambas and the importance of military service in shaping ancient societies. These early Kannada records collectively establish the language's capacity for coherent written communication, laying the foundational prose and scriptural styles upon which a rich literary and epigraphical tradition would flourish for millennia. The study of Early Kannada inscriptions is thus indispensable for understanding not only the linguistic evolution of Kannada but also the broader historical, cultural, and socio-political landscape of ancient Karnataka. They serve as silent, yet powerful, witnesses to the emergence of one of India's classical languages.

3.3 Early Telugu: Andhra's Scriptural Roots

The vast and ancient linguistic heritage of India encompasses both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families, each with its unique historical trajectory and epigraphical footprint. Within the Dravidian family, Telugu holds a prominent position as one of the major literary languages, spoken by millions across the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The journey of Telugu from its Proto-Dravidian origins to its present-day form is vividly illuminated by its **Early Telugu inscriptions**, which constitute **Andhra's Scriptural Roots**. These early epigraphs provide the earliest definitive evidence of the Telugu language in its written form, offering invaluable insights into its linguistic evolution, the cultural milieu of the Deccan, and the socio-political dynamics of ancient Andhra. Among these foundational records, the **Kalamalla Inscription of Erikal Mutturaju Dhananjaya** stands as a celebrated landmark, widely recognized as one of the earliest full-fledged examples of the Telugu language. The Telugu language, often poetically referred to as the "Italian of the East" due to its lyrical quality, boasts a literary tradition that stretches back centuries. However, the concrete evidence of its written form is primarily preserved in its early inscriptions. The emergence of Old Telugu in epigraphical records marks a crucial phase in the linguistic history of the Deccan, demonstrating its gradual differentiation from its common ancestral script and linguistic features shared with Old Kannada.

Language Family/Script

The language of these formative inscriptions is **Dravidian (Old Telugu)**, representing the earliest discernible stage of the Telugu language, distinct from its later medieval and modern forms. The script employed is the **Early Telugu-Kannada script**, also known as the **proto-Telugu-Kannada script**, which evolved from the southern branches of Brahmi. For several centuries, the scripts used for writing both Kannada and Telugu shared significant similarities, often making it challenging to differentiate them in their earliest phases without linguistic content. However, by the 6th century CE, as exemplified by the Kalamalla inscription, distinct features began to emerge, laying the groundwork for the independent development of the unique Telugu script. Like other Indic scripts derived from Brahmi, it is an abugida, where consonant characters carry an inherent vowel (typically 'a'), and other vowels are indicated by specific diacritical marks. The writing direction is generally from left to right.

Example Inscription: Kalamalla Inscription of Erikal Mutturaju Dhananjaya

The **Kalamalla Inscription** is a cornerstone for the study of early Telugu language and paleography. Its clear linguistic content makes it a crucial reference point for the antiquity of written Telugu.

- **Approximate Date:** The Kalamalla Inscription is generally dated to **c. 575 CE**. This dating is based on paleographical analysis of the script style, comparing it with other dated inscriptions from the period, particularly those of the early Telugu-Choda (or Choda) rulers in the Rayalaseema region. This mid-to-late 6th-century CE placement firmly establishes it as one of the earliest, if not the earliest, substantial inscription written distinctly in Telugu.
- **Location:** The inscription was discovered in the village of **Kalamalla, located in the YSR Kadapa district of Andhra Pradesh**. This region, part of the historically significant Rayalaseema area, was an important political and cultural center during the early medieval period, frequently under the rule of various dynasties, including the early Cholas of Renadu (known as Renati Cholas or Telugu-Chodas). The presence of the inscription in this heartland underscores its regional significance for the development of the Telugu language.
- **Content/Significance:**

- **Text (Excerpt - transliterated Old Telugu):** "Dhānājayuḍu era kalu raṭṭa guru kāḍa nāṭṭi..." (Dhananjaya, the lord of Era, the teacher of the village, established...)

A more complete transliteration and contextual translation of the inscription often cited is: "Erikaḷ Mutturāju Dhanañjayuḍu vāri rājulu vāsina yēbadi paruvulu pūrvamu Kalimalla Grāmaṁuna nāṭṭina Dharmamam" (Fifty measures of land, previously established by the kings of Eriḷ Mutturāju Dhananjaya, were consecrated as a Dharma (religious endowment) in the village of Kalimalla.)

The inscription proceeds to describe the consecration of a gift of land (or religious endowment) by Eriḷ Mutturāju Dhananjaya. It outlines the nature of the endowment and may refer to the restoration or affirmation of an earlier grant.

- **Significance:** The Kalamalla Inscription is widely **celebrated as one of the earliest definite examples of the Telugu language in its formative stage.** Its significance is manifold:
 - **Linguistic Primacy:** It provides concrete evidence of a well-developed Old Telugu language with its own distinct grammatical structures, vocabulary, and phonetic features, setting it apart from earlier Prakrit or Sanskrit dominance in the region. The inscription displays specific Telugu morphological markers (e.g., case endings, verb forms) that are crucial for tracing the language's evolution.
 - **Scriptural Differentiation:** The script of the Kalamalla inscription, while still bearing resemblances to contemporary Old Kannada scripts, clearly exhibits features that mark it as proto-Telugu. It shows the subtle but crucial divergences that would lead to the distinct and independent Telugu script. Thus, it serves as a key marker in the paleographical evolution of Telugu, demonstrating the point at which the common ancestral script began to specialize.
 - **Historical Record:** The inscription records a **gift of land** (or a religious endowment), highlighting early political and social customs related to land tenure and religious patronage in ancient Andhra. It introduces us to Eriḷ Mutturāju Dhananjaya, a local ruler or chieftain, providing

specific details that help reconstruct the political landscape of the Renadu region under the early Cholas.

- **Socio-Political Context:** It helps in understanding the local administration and the role of rulers in sanctioning or re-establishing religious endowments. The term "Mutturaju" itself is a significant title for local chieftains in the region.
- **Tracing Linguistic Development:** This inscription is **important for tracing the linguistic development of Telugu, which shares a common ancestral script with Kannada initially**. It provides a crucial early fixed point from which linguists can analyze the divergences between the two languages, identifying phonetic shifts, lexical innovations, and grammatical changes that led to their separate identities.

Evolution of Early Telugu Script (Proto-Telugu-Kannada to Early Telugu)

The script used for early Telugu inscriptions, often referred to as **Early Telugu-Kannada script**, reflects a common evolutionary path from the southern Brahmi tradition, shared with early Kannada. However, distinct features began to emerge and solidify over time:

1. **Southern Brahmi as Ancestor:** The foundation for both early Telugu and Kannada scripts was laid by the southern variants of Brahmi, particularly those prevalent in the Satavahana period (c. 2nd Century BCE - 3rd Century CE) in the Deccan, characterized by their more curvilinear forms.
2. **Transitional Phase (c. 4th-5th Century CE):** Inscriptions from dynasties like the Ikshvakus and early Pallavas (though primarily in Prakrit and Sanskrit) show Brahmi forms that are precursors to the later Telugu-Kannada script. The script of the Halmidi inscription (c. 450 CE) for Kannada and slightly earlier or contemporary records for Telugu belong to this shared, transitional phase.
3. **Emergence of Distinct Features (c. 6th Century CE onwards):** By the mid-6th century CE, as exemplified by the Kalamalla inscription, the Telugu script began to acquire its unique characteristics, gradually diverging from the Kannada script. While many letters remained similar, subtle differences in shape, head-marks, and the execution of vowel signs became apparent. This period coincides with the rise of

regional dynasties like the Renati Cholas (whose kings often carried the title 'Mutturaju'), who patronized the local language.

4. **Badami Chalukya Influence (c. 6th-8th Century CE):** The rise of the Western Chalukyas of Badami saw a more formalized development of both Kannada and Telugu scripts. Their inscriptions often reflect a common "Chalukyan script" style, but by the end of their rule, the distinctions between Old Kannada and Old Telugu scripts became much clearer. The Vimaladitya's Ramatirtham inscription (7th century CE) or the earlier Vijayawada Plates of Eastern Chalukya King Mangi Yuvaraja (7th century CE) are examples showing clearer Telugu features.

5. **Key Paleographical Features of Early Telugu:**

- **Rounded Forms:** Telugu script generally developed a more rounded and flowing appearance compared to Kannada, which sometimes retained more angularity.
- **Specific Letter Shapes:** Certain letters, like 'ra', 'sa', 'da', 'la', and vowel signs, started acquiring shapes that are distinctively Telugu.
- **Absence of Head-Marks:** While Kadamba Kannada script often had elaborate 'box' or 'wedge' heads, early Telugu tended towards simpler, more rounded heads or even a lack of prominent head-marks for some characters, though this varied regionally.
- **Development of Conjuncts:** The system for writing consonant clusters evolved, reflecting the phonetic needs of Telugu.

Content and Societal Insights from Early Telugu Inscriptions

The corpus of early Telugu inscriptions, though smaller than later periods, provides valuable insights into the social, economic, political, and religious life of ancient Andhra:

1. **Land Grants and Endowments:** Like many early Indian inscriptions, a significant portion of early Telugu records are land grants (dāna śāsanas) or religious endowments (dharma). These detail the transfer of land, villages, or revenue rights to temples, Brahmins, or religious institutions. They are crucial for understanding:
 - **Agrarian Economy:** The prevalence of land grants highlights the agrarian nature of the economy.

- **Revenue Systems:** Details about taxes, levies, and land measurements provide insights into administrative practices.
 - **Religious Patronage:** They confirm the patronage of various religious sects (Buddhism, Jainism, and increasingly Hinduism, particularly Vaishnavism and Shaivism) by rulers and elite families.
2. **Political Structures and Dynasties:** These inscriptions introduce us to various early dynasties and local chieftains. The Kalamalla inscription, for instance, mentions the Erikal Mutturaju, a branch of the Renati Cholas. Other early Telugu inscriptions belong to the Vishnukundinas, Eastern Chalukyas (who eventually ruled Andhra for centuries), and local chieftains, helping to reconstruct political chronologies and regional power dynamics.
 3. **Social Stratification:** While not explicitly detailing social classes, the donor information often reveals the status of individuals or groups (kings, chieftains, wealthy merchants, religious leaders), offering indirect insights into social hierarchy.
 4. **Linguistic Insights:** The primary significance lies in their linguistic content. They preserve archaic forms of Telugu, allowing linguists to:
 - **Trace Lexical Changes:** Identify words that have changed meaning or become obsolete.
 - **Analyze Grammatical Evolution:** Study the development of case markers, verb conjugations, and sentence structures.
 - **Understand Phonological Shifts:** Observe how sounds in Old Telugu differ from later forms.
 - **Differentiate from Kannada:** Pinpoint the specific linguistic features that mark the separation of Telugu from Kannada.
 5. **Religious Evolution:** The content of these inscriptions tracks the changing religious landscape. While early records might show Buddhist or Jain influence, later inscriptions increasingly reflect the growing prominence of Hindu deities and temple building activities.

Challenges and Future Directions

The study of Early Telugu epigraphy faces particular challenges:

1. **Paucity of Records:** Compared to Old Tamil or Old Kannada, the corpus of undisputed early Telugu inscriptions (pre-7th century CE) is relatively smaller, making comprehensive linguistic analysis more difficult.
2. **Shared Script with Kannada:** The close resemblance between early Telugu and Kannada scripts can make attribution challenging, especially in bilingual contexts or for very short, fragmented texts. Expertise in both paleography and historical linguistics is essential.
3. **Influence of Sanskrit and Prakrit:** Many early inscriptions from Andhra, even those with Telugu elements, are predominantly in Sanskrit or Prakrit, requiring careful discernment to identify the native Telugu portions.
4. **Debates on "Earliest":** As with any "earliest" claim, there can be ongoing scholarly debate regarding whether a particular inscription represents the absolute earliest or merely the earliest *well-preserved* or *unambiguous* example.

Future research in Early Telugu epigraphy will continue to focus on:

- **Discovery and Documentation:** Continued archaeological surveys in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana hold the promise of unearthing more early inscriptions.
- **Refined Paleographical and Linguistic Analysis:** Deeper comparative studies with other Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages can refine dating and linguistic interpretations.
- **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Integrating epigraphical data with archaeological finds, literary sources (if any pre-7th century Telugu literature is found), and numismatics can provide a more holistic understanding.

The **Early Telugu inscriptions**, exemplified by the **Kalamalla Inscription of Erikal Mutturaju Dhananjaya** (c. 575 CE), stand as the foundational **scriptural roots of Andhra's language**. Located in the heartland of the early Chola (Renati Chola) domain, this inscription is celebrated as one of the earliest definite and substantial examples of the Telugu language in its formative stage. Its content, typically a land grant, provides invaluable insights into the socio-political and economic customs of ancient Andhra, highlighting royal patronage and administrative practices. Crucially, the script of the Kalamalla inscription marks a significant

point in the paleographical evolution of Telugu, demonstrating its gradual but distinct differentiation from the common ancestral "proto-Telugu-Kannada" script. This inscription thus provides a concrete chronological and linguistic benchmark for tracing the independent development of Telugu, which would eventually blossom into one of the richest and most widely spoken Dravidian languages. The study of Early Telugu epigraphy is indispensable for understanding the linguistic, cultural, and historical trajectory of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, shedding light on the genesis of a vibrant literary tradition and the intricate tapestry of South Indian history.

3.4 Early Malayalam: Kerala's Distinctive Script

The linguistic landscape of the Indian subcontinent is characterized by the rich diversity of its Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families. Within the Dravidian family, **Malayalam** stands out as a distinct and historically rich language, primarily spoken in the southwestern state of Kerala. Its unique identity, both linguistically and culturally, has been shaped over centuries, with its origins traceable to an Old Tamil base that gradually diverged into a separate entity. The unfolding of **Kerala's distinctive script** and language is predominantly revealed through its **Early Malayalam inscriptions**, which provide the earliest tangible evidence of this linguistic separation and the emergence of a unique cultural sphere. While its earliest roots are intertwined with Old Tamil, inscriptions like the **Vazhappally Copper Plate** mark a pivotal moment, showcasing Old Malayalam's formative stages and providing invaluable insights into the social, religious, and administrative history of early medieval Kerala. The evolution of Malayalam from Old Tamil is a fascinating process of linguistic divergence. For a significant period, the language spoken in what is now Kerala was largely indistinguishable from Old Tamil, forming a dialectal continuum. However, a combination of geographical isolation (the Western Ghats acting as a natural barrier), distinct socio-political developments, and perhaps interaction with other linguistic groups (including Indo-Aryan speakers and West Asian traders) led to the development of unique phonological, morphological, and lexical features that eventually solidified into a separate language: Malayalam. The epigraphical records are the most reliable witnesses to this transformative journey.

Language Family/Script

The language of these early records is **Dravidian (Old Malayalam/Tamil)**, indicating a transitional phase where the language, while still sharing many features with Old Tamil, had

begun to acquire distinct characteristics that would later define Malayalam. The scripts predominantly employed are **Vatteluttu** and, to a lesser extent, **Grantha**.

- **Vatteluttu** (literally "round script") is an ancient indigenous South Indian script that evolved from a southern Brahmi variant. It was widely used in Tamil Nadu and Kerala for writing Tamil and, crucially, early Malayalam. Its name refers to its characteristic rounded characters.
- **Grantha** is another Brahmi-derived script, primarily used in Tamil Nadu and Kerala for writing Sanskrit texts. While not the primary script for Malayalam, its influence on the development of the Malayalam script (which eventually adopted many features of Grantha) is undeniable, especially for writing Sanskrit loanwords. The modern Malayalam script is essentially a fusion of Vatteluttu and Grantha.

Example Inscription: Vazhappally Copper Plate

The **Vazhappally Copper Plate** holds a position of paramount importance in the study of early Malayalam language and history.



Figure 7: Vazhappally copper plate (plate 1, side 1) replica



Figure 6: Vazhappally copper plate (plate 1, side 2) replica

It is often cited as the earliest available inscription with distinctive Malayalam characteristics.

- **Approximate Date:** The Vazhappally Copper Plate is conventionally dated to **c. 832 CE**. This dating is derived from the regnal year mentioned in the inscription (12th regnal year of Rajasekhara, identified as Rajasekhara Varman, a Chera Perumal ruler) and astronomical calculations that pinpoint the specific date mentioned. While some scholarly debate exists on precise dating methodologies and the exact beginning of the Kollam Era (Malayalam Calendar) to which some scholars relate it, the early 9th century CE dating is widely accepted, placing it firmly in the early medieval period of Kerala's history.

- **Location:** The copper plate was found in the **Vazhappally Maha Ganapathi Temple in Vazhappally, Kottayam district, Kerala**. Kottayam district is located in central Kerala, a historical heartland of the Chera kingdom. The temple context of the inscription underscores its religious significance and its role in documenting temple administration and regulations.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - Old Malayalam/Tamil):** The inscription is a lengthy record, primarily written in a blend of Old Tamil and Old Malayalam, with some Sanskrit influence. It details the establishment of a perpetual lamp (nityananda vilakku) in the Vazhappally temple and outlines various regulations concerning its maintenance. Crucially, it lists specific punishments (mūlikkalakam) for those who violate the rules or cause harm to the temple property. It also defines the rights and duties of the temple functionaries and the local assembly (parishad) in charge of the temple affairs.
 - **Significance:** The Vazhappally Copper Plate is considered **one of the earliest significant documents in Old Malayalam (or a very early form of Tamil with distinct Malayalam features)**. Its importance is multi-faceted:
 - **Linguistic Milestone:** It provides concrete linguistic evidence for the nascent stage of Malayalam as a distinct language. While it still bears strong resemblances to Old Tamil, it showcases features that are characteristic of early Malayalam, such as specific phonological changes, distinct lexical items, and grammatical structures that are not typically found in contemporary Tamil inscriptions. This plate helps linguists trace the divergence of Malayalam from its Old Tamil base.
 - **Scriptural Evidence:** The inscription is primarily **written in Vatteluttu script**. It is a superb example of this rounded, indigenous script, demonstrating its mature form and its widespread use in early Kerala. The script's features are ancestral to the later Malayalam script, which would incorporate elements from Grantha.
 - **Religious and Temple Administration:** The detailed regulations concerning the Vazhappally temple provide invaluable insights into the

religious practices and administrative history of early medieval Kerala. It reveals the structure of temple management, the role of local assemblies (similar to 'sabhas' or 'urs' elsewhere), and the legal framework for protecting temple property. This information is critical for understanding the socio-religious life of the period.

- **Legal and Social Customs:** The specific punishments enumerated for various transgressions offer a unique glimpse into the **legal and social customs** prevalent in 9th-century Kerala. They highlight the concept of community responsibility and the mechanisms for maintaining social order.
- **Political Context:** The mention of King Rajasekhara and the dating system (referencing the Kollam Era's possible inception) connects the inscription to the political history of the Chera Perumal kingdom of Mahodayapuram (modern Kodungallur), a significant regional power. It demonstrates the ruler's patronage of temples and his role in upholding religious and social order.
- **Economic Aspects:** Indirectly, the details of the perpetual lamp and its maintenance suggest economic arrangements, such as endowments or contributions, for the sustenance of religious institutions.

Evolution of Early Malayalam Language and Script

The evolution of Malayalam is a process spanning several centuries, with the Vazhappally Copper Plate marking a significant point of divergence.

1. **Old Tamil Substratum:** Until roughly the 9th century CE, the language of Kerala was essentially a dialect of Old Tamil. This common linguistic base is evident in the striking similarities between the earliest Malayalam records and contemporary Old Tamil inscriptions.
2. **Influences and Divergence (c. 9th Century CE onwards):**
 - **Phonological Changes:** Malayalam developed unique phonological features, such as the loss of the final nasal in certain words (e.g., *akam* becomes *aka*), the

change of initial 'p' to 'v' in some contexts, and the simplification of geminated consonants.

- **Lexical Additions:** While sharing much vocabulary with Tamil, Malayalam absorbed more loanwords from Sanskrit due to the strong influence of Nambudiri Brahmins and Sanskrit scholastic traditions in Kerala. This influx of Sanskrit vocabulary enriched the language and contributed to its distinct character.
- **Grammatical Shifts:** Gradual grammatical divergences, particularly in verb conjugations, noun inflections, and sentence structure, began to emerge.

3. Script Development - Vatteluttu and Grantha:

- **Vatteluttu:** This indigenous script was prevalent in the Chera kingdom. It is characterized by its rounded forms, which made it suitable for writing on palm-leaf manuscripts. Many early Malayalam inscriptions are in Vatteluttu, clearly demonstrating its function as the primary script for the vernacular. Examples like the Vazhappally Plate, the Kottayam Plate of Sthanu Ravi Varma, and the Jewish Copper Plate of Bhaskara Ravi Varma are key Vatteluttu records.
- **Grantha:** As Sanskrit gained prominence due to Brahmin migration and the rise of temple culture, the Grantha script became indispensable for writing Sanskrit texts in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- **Evolution of Malayalam Script:** Over time, the Malayalam script itself evolved as a blend of Vatteluttu and Grantha. Vatteluttu formed the core for native Dravidian sounds, while Grantha signs were incorporated to represent Sanskrit phonemes that were not present in Vatteluttu. This fusion led to the development of the modern Malayalam script, which is one of the most comprehensive and phonetically rich abugidas in India. The process of fusion was largely complete by the 15th-16th centuries.

Other Significant Early Malayalam Inscriptions

While the Vazhappally Plate is foundational, other inscriptions further illuminate the emergence of Malayalam:

1. **Jewish Copper Plate of Bhaskara Ravi Varma (c. 1000 CE):** This inscription, primarily in Vatteluttu (with a few lines in Old Tamil and Judeo-Persian), records a grant of privileges to the Jewish merchant Joseph Rabban by the Chera king Bhaskara Ravi Varma. It provides crucial insights into the tolerant religious policies of the Chera kings and the presence of a flourishing Jewish community in Kodungallur. Its linguistic features also show further evolution towards Malayalam.
2. **Syrian Christian Copper Plates (Tarissappalli Plates) (c. 849 CE):** These plates record a grant of land and privileges to the Syrian Christian community by Ayyanadikal Tiruvadikal, a local chief under the Chera Perumal. Written in Vatteluttu, these plates are invaluable for understanding the history of Christianity in Kerala, land tenure systems, and local administration. They are slightly earlier than the Jewish Plate and provide more linguistic data from the 9th century.
3. **Kottayam Plate of Sthanu Ravi Varma (c. 860 CE):** This plate, in Vatteluttu and Grantha, records a grant to the Christian community and provides significant historical and social details about the Chera kingdom.

These inscriptions collectively illustrate the gradual shift from Old Tamil to Old Malayalam, both in linguistic features and script forms. They also provide a rich tapestry of social, economic, political, and religious life in early medieval Kerala.

Content and Societal Insights

The early Malayalam inscriptions, through their varied content, offer a deep dive into the socio-cultural fabric of early medieval Kerala:

1. **Temple-Centric Society:** Many inscriptions, like the Vazhappally Plate, are directly related to temple administration, endowments, and regulations. This highlights the central role of temples as not just religious centers but also as significant economic entities, landholders, and administrative units in the local community.
2. **Local Governance and Assemblies:** The frequent mention of local assemblies (like the *parishad* or *uru*) in managing temple affairs or land grants underscores the importance of decentralized governance structures. These bodies played a crucial role in maintaining order and implementing royal decrees.

3. **Religious Pluralism:** The copper plates granting privileges to Jewish and Syrian Christian communities (Jewish Copper Plate, Tarisappalli Plates) are unique in Indian epigraphy. They demonstrate the remarkable religious tolerance and multiculturalism prevalent in early Kerala, where various religious groups co-existed and thrived under royal patronage, often engaged in maritime trade.
4. **Trade and Maritime Connections:** The presence of foreign communities (Jews, Christians) and the nature of some grants (e.g., trade-related privileges) point to Kerala's flourishing maritime trade connections with West Asia and beyond. This economic activity fueled the prosperity of the region and contributed to its cultural exchange.
5. **Land Tenure and Economy:** The details of land grants, taxation, and duties provide insights into the agrarian economy and the sophisticated land tenure systems of the period.
6. **Legal and Judicial Systems:** The enumeration of punishments for specific offenses (e.g., in the Vazhappally Plate) reveals aspects of the legal and judicial framework that existed at the local level.
7. **Sanskrit Influence:** The increasing number of Sanskrit words and grammatical structures in later Old Malayalam inscriptions reflects the growing influence of Sanskrit literature, ritual, and learning due to the prominence of Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala society.

Challenges in Studying Early Malayalam Epigraphy

1. **Distinguishing Old Malayalam from Old Tamil:** Due to their close relationship, drawing a definitive line between very early Old Malayalam and late Old Tamil in inscriptions can be challenging for linguists. The distinction often relies on subtle phonological and morphological differences.
2. **Script Familiarity:** Vatteluttu is an ancient script that requires specialized training to read, making these inscriptions less accessible than those in later Malayalam scripts.
3. **Fragmentary Nature:** Some early records are incomplete or damaged, hindering a full understanding of their content.

4. **Dating Methodologies:** While some dates are precise, others rely on paleographical evidence or correlations with other historical sources, which can be subject to debate.

Despite these challenges, the meticulous work of epigraphists and linguists has been instrumental in piecing together the story of early Malayalam.

The **Early Malayalam inscriptions**, exemplified by the pivotal **Vazhappally Copper Plate (c. 832 CE)**, are indispensable for understanding **Kerala's distinctive script** and the emergence of its language. While rooted in an Old Tamil linguistic substratum, these records mark the crucial period of divergence, showcasing the nascent phonological, lexical, and grammatical features that define Old Malayalam. The consistent use of the indigenous **Vatteluttu script** in these early documents underscores its role as the primary written medium for the vernacular, even as the Grantha script served for Sanskrit. Beyond their linguistic significance, these inscriptions offer a rich tapestry of insights into the early medieval history of Kerala. They meticulously detail temple administration, reveal the functioning of local assemblies, illuminate a remarkable tradition of religious pluralism (evidenced by grants to Jewish and Christian communities), and shed light on ancient trade networks and legal customs. The Vazhappally Copper Plate, in particular, stands as a foundational document, providing direct, contemporary evidence of early temple organization and societal norms in 9th-century Kerala. The study of Early Malayalam epigraphy is thus vital for comprehending the unique socio-cultural identity of Kerala and its contribution to the broader South Indian historical narrative. These inscriptions are not merely records of the past; they are the enduring voice of a distinctive linguistic and cultural heritage that continues to thrive today.

Chapter IV

Early Sanskrit and Regional Indo-Aryan Languages

The journey of writing in India is characterized by a fascinating interplay of linguistic and scriptural evolution. While early deciphered records were predominantly in various forms of Prakrit, largely in Brahmi script, the millennium following the Mauryan era witnessed a significant linguistic shift: the increasing ascendancy of **Sanskrit** as the language of royal courts, religious discourse, and literary expression. This transition from regional Prakrits to the formalized, grammatically sophisticated Sanskrit is vividly documented in **Early Sanskrit inscriptions**, which represent a crucial phase where '**The Classical Language**' found its voice '**in Stone**'. These epigraphs are not merely linguistic milestones but also invaluable historical sources, illuminating political achievements, administrative policies, and societal values. Among the most iconic and pivotal of these is the **Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman I**, a monumental text that unequivocally heralds the definitive shift towards Sanskrit as the language of imperial communication. Sanskrit, belonging to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European family of languages, holds an unparalleled position in Indian civilization as the primary language of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and the vehicle for a vast corpus of classical literature, philosophy, and scientific thought. While Old Indo-Aryan (Vedic Sanskrit) existed much earlier in oral traditions (e.g., the Vedas), its appearance in comprehensive written form, especially in secular and royal inscriptions, is a later phenomenon. The transition from the popular Prakrits to the highly standardized Sanskrit for epigraphical purposes reflects a conscious choice by rulers to project authority, intellectual sophistication, and cultural prestige.

Language Family/Script

The language of these inscriptions is **Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit)**, specifically Classical Sanskrit, adhering to the grammatical rules laid down by Panini in his *Ashtadhyayi* (c. 5th-4th century BCE). The script employed is **Brahmi**, or rather its evolving regional variants, as Brahmi remained the foundational script for both Prakrit and Sanskrit inscriptions across India. The forms of Brahmi used for early Sanskrit inscriptions often show greater refinement and formality, reflecting the sophisticated nature of the language itself. This marks a crucial development from the simpler, more functional Brahmi of the Ashokan edicts.

Example Inscription: Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman I

The **Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman I** stands as a monumental testament to the rise of Sanskrit in epigraphical records. It is a text of immense historical, linguistic, and even engineering significance.

- **Approximate Date:** The inscription is securely dated to **c. 150 CE**. This dating is derived from internal evidence within the inscription, which provides the precise regnal year of Rudradaman (year 72 of the Saka Era, corresponding to 150 CE). This places it in the mid-2nd century CE, a period following the decline of the Mauryas and Sungas, and marked by the rise of various regional powers, including the Western Kshatrapas.
- **Location:** The inscription is carved on a large rock near the city of **Junagadh, in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat**. This rock is a site of significant historical importance, as it also bears earlier inscriptions of Emperor Ashoka (in Prakrit) and a later inscription of the Gupta emperor Skandagupta (in Sanskrit). This multi-layered epigraphic presence on the same rock beautifully symbolizes the transition of linguistic and imperial traditions in India. The location in Saurashtra, a frontier region often contested by various powers, adds to its strategic and historical significance.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - Sanskrit):** "suvidhakānām amātyānām guṇābharaṇam mahākṣatrapaḥ Rudradāmā..." (The great Kshatrapa Rudradaman, an ornament among ministers, possessing many virtues...)

A more extensive and contextualized excerpt, illustrating the detailed and elaborate nature of the inscription, might include parts describing Rudradaman's qualities and the dam repair:

"...yaḥ svabhāvadīnānām anurāgeṇa sarva-varṇair abhigamya sarva-bhāvaiḥ pratyekam api dharmanishṭhasya dhārmikasya saṁgrāma-kṣetra-prāpta-dhārmāvicāratara-viśuddha-dhanasya pratidinam abhijīvato dharmam aprapattasya ca Mahākṣatrapasya Rudradāmnaḥ samyak-prapātam... Varṣārta-bhīta-jantūnām saras-tāḍana-prabhūta-vāraṇām samyag-vyavasthāpayataḥ..." (He who, through his natural compassion, was approached by all castes, with all dispositions, the righteous, the one steadfast in Dharma, whose wealth, acquired through the battlefield, was pure and beyond reproach, the Great Kshatrapa Rudradaman, who daily lives by Dharma without faltering... [describing his virtues]... And who, having rightly established for those creatures terrified by the rainy season, a lake abundant with water [from the overflow of the dam], when the Sudarshana lake burst...)

The inscription is a lengthy and highly ornate prose-poem (a *praśasti*). It begins with a detailed eulogy of Rudradaman, extolling his virtues as a just ruler, a skilled warrior, a master of grammar, music, and logic, and a protector of his subjects. It then proceeds to narrate the dramatic story of the Sudarshana Lake, an ancient artificial reservoir. It states that the lake, originally built by Chandragupta Maurya and later adorned by Ashoka, was severely damaged by a massive storm during Rudradaman's reign. Despite the advice of his ministers against it, Rudradaman, driven by his compassion for his subjects, personally undertook the enormous task of repairing the dam, spending vast sums from his own treasury without burdening his people with taxes. The inscription concludes by praising his unwavering commitment to dharma and his subjects' welfare.

- **Significance:** The Junagadh Rock Inscription is monumental for several reasons:

- **First Long Inscription in Chaste Sanskrit:** This is widely considered **the first long inscription in chaste Sanskrit** in India. Prior to this, most royal inscriptions, including those of Ashoka, were in various Prakrit dialects. While Sanskrit was present in oral traditions and early literary forms (e.g., Vedic texts), its formal adoption as the language of state and public record on such a grand scale marks a definitive shift. The inscription showcases a sophisticated command of Classical Sanskrit grammar, rhetoric, and poetic structure, indicating that Sanskrit had by this time evolved into a well-established language of high culture and statecraft.
- **Shift from Prakrit to Sanskrit:** It directly demonstrates a **shift from Prakrit to Sanskrit as the language of royal records**. This linguistic transition reflects a broader cultural and intellectual movement in India, where Sanskrit began to assert its dominance as a language of prestige, learning, and pan-Indian communication among the elite, gradually marginalizing the Prakrits in official discourse.
- **Historical and Dynastic Information:** It provides crucial **historical and dynastic information** about the Western Kshatrapas, a powerful Saka dynasty that ruled parts of Western India. It details Rudradaman's lineage, his extensive military conquests against various contemporary

powers (including the Satavahanas), and his administrative prowess. This inscription is a primary source for reconstructing the history of this often-overlooked period.

- **Hydrological and Engineering History:** The detailed account of the repair of the Sudarshana Lake offers invaluable insights into ancient Indian **hydrological engineering and water management**. The lake's origins (attributed to Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka) provide a rare direct epigraphical link to earlier imperial efforts in public works. The narrative of the dam's destruction and Rudradaman's personal commitment to its repair showcases ancient Indian engineering capabilities and the ruler's sense of responsibility towards public welfare.
- **Royal Virtues and Ideals:** The inscription serves as a classic *praśasti*, vividly portraying the ideals of kingship and the virtues expected of a benevolent ruler in ancient India. Rudradaman is depicted as a protector of his subjects, a skilled statesman, a patron of arts, and a righteous monarch.
- **Religious Neutrality:** While not explicitly religious in content (unlike many later Sanskrit inscriptions which focus on temple grants), its emphasis on Dharma and the welfare of subjects aligns with broader Indian ethical traditions.

Genesis and Ascendancy of Sanskrit in Epigraphy

The transition from Prakrit to Sanskrit in inscriptions was a gradual process, culminating in the widespread adoption seen from the Gupta period onwards.

1. **Early Vedic Period (Pre-600 BCE):** Sanskrit exists as Old Indo-Aryan (Vedic Sanskrit) primarily in oral traditions. Written records are absent.
2. **Panini and the Formalization of Classical Sanskrit (c. 5th-4th Century BCE):** The grammarian Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* codified Sanskrit grammar, establishing a precise, standardized form that became known as Classical Sanskrit. This intellectual feat provided the linguistic framework for Sanskrit's later dominance.

3. **Mauryan Period (c. 3rd Century BCE):** Ashokan edicts are almost exclusively in various regional Prakrits, reflecting the language of the common people. While some scholars suggest a subtle influence of Sanskrit in the more formal aspects of Ashokan Prakrit, it is not Sanskrit itself.
4. **Early Post-Mauryan Period (c. 2nd Century BCE - 1st Century CE):** Prakrits continue to dominate epigraphy. However, isolated Sanskrit words or phrases begin to appear in otherwise Prakrit inscriptions. Early inscriptions of the Sunga and Satavahana dynasties primarily use Prakrit, but the seeds of Sanskrit's rise are being sown.
5. **Rise of Sanskrit as a Lingua Franca of the Elite (1st Century CE onwards):** This period sees a marked increase in Sanskrit's use. Several factors contributed:
 - **Brahmanical Resurgence:** The post-Mauryan period witnessed a resurgence of Brahmanical traditions and Vedic rituals. Sanskrit, being the language of the Vedas and classical Hindu scriptures, naturally gained prominence.
 - **Literary Flourishing:** This era saw the composition of major Sanskrit literary works (e.g., early epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, early Puranas, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*). The development of sophisticated Sanskrit literature further cemented its status as a language of high culture.
 - **Patronage of Foreign Rulers:** Interestingly, foreign rulers like the Sakas (e.g., Rudradaman I) and Kushanas, who sought to legitimize their rule within the Indian cultural framework, often patronized Sanskrit. Adopting Sanskrit, the language of the learned elite, allowed them to connect with Brahmanical institutions and gain acceptance from indigenous populations.
 - **Desire for Clarity and Precision:** As administrative and legal documents became more complex, the grammatical precision and lexical richness of Sanskrit offered advantages over the more fluid and regionally diverse Prakrits.
6. **The Junagadh Inscription (c. 150 CE) as a Turning Point:** Rudradaman's inscription is a monumental example of this trend. Its extensive length, elaborate prose, and perfect adherence to Classical Sanskrit grammar set a new standard for royal proclamations. It signifies Sanskrit's firm establishment as a language suitable for imperial records.

7. Gupta Age (c. 4th-6th Century CE) - The Golden Age of Sanskrit Epigraphy:

Following Junagadh, the Gupta period witnessed the absolute dominance of Sanskrit in inscriptions. Almost all major royal inscriptions, land grants, and eulogies (*praśastis*) from this era are in Sanskrit. The elegant, highly polished Sanskrit of the Gupta inscriptions (e.g., Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription of Chandra) marks the zenith of Sanskrit in stone.

Characteristics of Early Sanskrit Inscriptions

Early Sanskrit inscriptions exhibit several distinct characteristics:

1. **Chaste Grammar and Vocabulary:** Unlike earlier Prakrit inscriptions or hybrid Sanskrit-Prakrit texts, these inscriptions adhere strictly to the rules of Classical Sanskrit grammar (Paninian grammar). They employ a rich and precise vocabulary.
2. **Ornate Prose and Poetic Qualities:** Many early Sanskrit inscriptions, especially *praśastis*, are highly ornate, written in elaborate prose (*gadya*) or metrical verse (*padya*). They utilize literary devices, figures of speech (*alaṅkāras*), and complex sentence structures, showcasing the literary sophistication of the period. The Junagadh inscription, though prose, is exceptionally refined.
3. **Formulaic Openings and Closings:** Many inscriptions begin with auspicious invocations (e.g., *Om Namaḥ Śivāya*, *Siddham*) and conclude with traditional benedictory or imprecatory verses (e.g., warnings against violating the grant).
4. **Detailed Content:** They often provide very detailed information on:
 - **Genealogies:** Tracing royal lineages and ancestors.
 - **Military Victories:** Describing conquests, campaigns, and subjugated rulers.
 - **Administrative Details:** Mentioning officials, divisions of territory, land measures, and taxes.
 - **Religious Endowments:** Recording grants to Brahmins, temples, and monasteries.
 - **Cultural Achievements:** Sometimes mentioning a ruler's patronage of arts, literature, or philosophy.

5. **Script Evolution (Formal Brahmi):** The Brahmi script used for Sanskrit inscriptions often takes on a more formal, elegant, and often stylized appearance. This evolution leads to the development of what is known as 'Gupta Brahmi' (a direct descendant of earlier Brahmi), which in turn becomes the ancestor of most North Indian scripts like Nagari (Devanagari). The characters become more angular, symmetrical, and aesthetically refined.

Historical and Cultural Impact

The rise of Sanskrit in epigraphy had profound implications for Indian history and culture:

1. **Standardization of Historical Record:** The use of a single, highly standardized language across diverse regions facilitated greater uniformity in administrative and historical records, making it easier for scholars to interpret and compare texts from different parts of the subcontinent.
2. **Cultural Unification (among elites):** While regional Prakrits continued to be spoken, Sanskrit served as a unifying cultural language among the educated elite, transcending linguistic boundaries. Its adoption in inscriptions signifies this pan-Indian cultural integration.
3. **Reinforcement of Brahmanical Authority:** The use of Sanskrit in royal charters and religious endowments reinforced the authority of Brahmins and their role as custodians of sacred knowledge and interpreters of Dharma.
4. **Source for Reconstruction of Classical Period:** Sanskrit inscriptions, especially from the Gupta period onwards, become the primary historical sources for reconstructing the political, social, and cultural history of the classical age of India. They complement and often corroborate information from literary texts, which are often difficult to date or verify independently.
5. **Influence on Literary Production:** The epigraphical style of Sanskrit, particularly the ornate *praśasti*, influenced and was influenced by contemporary Sanskrit literary traditions. The elegance of language and mastery of poetic forms seen in inscriptions are mirrored in the works of classical Sanskrit poets and dramatists.

Challenges in Studying Early Sanskrit Epigraphy

Despite their richness, studying early Sanskrit inscriptions presents certain challenges:

1. **Ornate Language and Complexity:** The highly ornate and verbose nature of many *praśastis* can make them challenging to translate and interpret, often requiring deep knowledge of Sanskrit grammar, poetics, and historical context.
2. **Eulogistic Bias:** As royal eulogies, *praśastis* naturally present a biased view, often exaggerating a ruler's virtues and victories. Critical analysis is required to extract verifiable historical facts.
3. **Technical Terminology:** Inscriptions related to land grants often contain specialized administrative, legal, and land-measurement terminology that requires careful understanding.
4. **Paleographical Expertise:** While the script is Brahmi-derived, its stylistic evolution over centuries requires specialized paleographical knowledge to accurately date and interpret inscriptions.
5. **Conservation Challenges:** Inscriptions on rock faces are exposed to natural elements, leading to weathering and damage, making full recovery of text difficult. Copper plates, though more durable, can also suffer damage or oxidation.

Despite these challenges, the meticulous work of epigraphists, lexicographers, and historians continues to unlock the vast storehouse of knowledge contained within these records.

The **Early Sanskrit inscriptions**, profoundly exemplified by the **Junagadh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman I (c. 150 CE)**, signify a watershed moment in the epigraphical history of India. Carved on the ancient rock of Junagadh, this monumental text is celebrated as the **first long inscription in chaste Classical Sanskrit**, marking a definitive **shift from Prakrit to Sanskrit as the language of royal records**. This linguistic transition reflects a broader cultural renaissance where Sanskrit ascended to become the preeminent language of intellectual discourse, statecraft, and high culture across the subcontinent.

Beyond its linguistic significance, the Junagadh inscription is a treasure trove of historical information. It provides unparalleled insights into the Western Kshatrapa ruler Rudradaman's military prowess, administrative acumen, and his unwavering commitment to public welfare, notably his heroic efforts in repairing the ancient Sudarshana Lake. This detailed narrative offers crucial data on ancient Indian hydrological engineering and water management, while simultaneously serving as a classic example of a *praśasti* that defines the ideals of kingship.

The ascendance of Sanskrit in stone, fully realized during the subsequent Gupta age, standardized historical documentation, fostered cultural unification among the elite, and reinforced Brahmanical authority. These early Sanskrit inscriptions, with their ornate prose, precise grammar, and rich detail, are indispensable primary sources for reconstructing the political, social, and cultural landscape of classical India. They stand as enduring testaments to the power of language and the enduring legacy of a civilization that meticulously inscribed its achievements and values, allowing "The Classical Language" to speak eloquently from "Stone" across millennia.

4.2 Early Odia: Utkala's Literary Heritage

The Indian subcontinent is a land of profound linguistic diversity, where each region proudly preserves its unique linguistic and literary heritage. In the eastern part of India, the state of Odisha (historically known as Kalinga or Utkala) boasts a rich cultural legacy intertwined with the evolution of the **Odia language**. While Modern Odia is a vibrant Indo-Aryan language, its roots delve deep into antiquity, with its formative stages visible in **Early Odia inscriptions**. These epigraphical records, though initially presenting a blend of Prakrit and nascent Odia features, provide crucial insights into **Utkala's Literary Heritage**, tracing the linguistic journey that culminates in the distinctive Odia script and language. Among these, the **Hati Gumpah Inscription of Kharavela** stands as an unparalleled monument, not only for its historical significance as an extensive royal biography but also for its crucial role in illuminating the linguistic landscape of ancient Kalinga, foreshadowing the birth of Odia. The Odia language belongs to the Indo-Aryan family, evolving from Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) through Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrits and Apabhramshas). Like many regional Indo-Aryan languages, Odia's emergence as a distinct linguistic entity was a gradual process, influenced by geographical factors, political developments, and cultural interactions. The region of Odisha, strategically located along the coast and traversed by ancient trade routes, was a melting pot of various influences. The transition from the prevalent regional Prakrits to a nascent form of Odia, and eventually to fully developed Old Odia, is best understood through a careful examination of its epigraphical records.

Language Family/Script

The language of the earliest relevant inscriptions is primarily **Indo-Aryan (Prakrit with early Odia influences)**. This indicates a transitional phase where the dominant language of administration and record-keeping was still a form of Middle Indo-Aryan Prakrit (likely

Magadhi or Ardhamagadhi Prakrit, given Kalinga's historical connections), but it began to absorb and reflect local phonetic and grammatical tendencies that would eventually coalesce into Old Odia. The script employed is the **Early Odia Script**, which is directly **derived from Brahmi**. This script, while initially sharing many features with contemporary Brahmi variants from other parts of India, began to acquire its own distinctive stylistic characteristics over centuries, eventually evolving into the highly curvilinear and aesthetically pleasing modern Odia script. As an abugida, it follows the Brahmi principle of an inherent vowel with diacritics for modifications, and is written from left to right.

Example Inscription: Hati Gumpha Inscription of Kharavela

The **Hati Gumpha (Elephant Cave) Inscription of Emperor Kharavela** is arguably the most significant ancient inscription from Odisha, a monumental autobiographical account of a powerful ruler.

- **Approximate Date:** The inscription is generally dated to **c. 2nd-1st Century BCE**. This dating is based on paleographical analysis of the script, its linguistic features (Prakrit with archaic elements), and historical context, aligning it with the period immediately following the decline of the Mauryan Empire. This places it well before the full emergence of Old Odia as a distinct written language but firmly in the proto-Odia linguistic landscape.
- **Location:** The inscription is carved into the overhanging brow of a natural cavern known as Hati Gumpha (Elephant Cave) in the **Udayagiri Caves complex, near Bhubaneswar, Odisha**. The Udayagiri and Khandagiri hills are famous for their ancient rock-cut shelters, many of which were used by Jain ascetics. The location in the historical heartland of Kalinga underscores its direct relevance to the region's ancient history.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - Prakrit with early Odia influences):** The Hati Gumpha inscription is unique for being an almost complete, continuous prose narrative of a king's life and achievements, covering a period of 13 regnal years. It is a long, highly detailed inscription, written in a form of Prakrit that has elements of what scholars consider a regional variant, perhaps the precursor to Odia.

A more accurate reflection of the text's character, illustrating its Prakrit base and historical detail, would involve sections like: "Arahamta-pasādanam saṃghayatanavaṃdanem karimḍham... duvehi pi ca varisehi saṃdāpayati mahāvijaya-dharaṃ rāja-nivāsanam vataṃ dhārayati... paṃcamam ca dāniṃ avasoṃ bhārahe varisata-samītaṃ..." (With the grace of the Arhats, he caused to be built residences for the Sangha... And in two years, he caused to be built the great Vijayadhara, the royal palace, and took a vow... And now, in the fifth year, in Bharatavarsha, which is a hundred years old...)

The inscription is a grand eulogy (praśasti) and an autobiography of Kharavela, the king of Kalinga of the Mahameghavahana dynasty. It recounts his life year by year, from his early education and youth to his accession to the throne, and then a detailed account of his campaigns, administrative achievements, and pious acts during his 13-year reign. Key events include:

- His restoration of the ancient capital of Kalinga.
 - His military campaigns against various kingdoms (Magadha, Satavahanas, Pandyas), claiming victories and bringing back treasures, including a Jain idol from Magadha.
 - His extensive public works, such as the excavation of canals originally built by the Nanda kings.
 - His patronage of Jainism, making endowments and building structures for Jain ascetics.
 - His proficiency in various arts and sciences.
- **Significance:** While **not purely Old Odia**, the Hati Gumpā Inscription is absolutely **fundamental to understanding the linguistic evolution in the region that would become Odisha**. Its language, though Prakrit, belongs to a dialect that shows regional peculiarities and archaic forms that are considered precursors to Odia. Linguists study its phonetics and morphology for early features that foreshadow the development of Odia, such as the retention of certain intervocalic consonants or specific vocabulary.

Beyond its linguistic importance, its historical significance is immense:

- **Epic Biography of a Powerful King:** It provides the most comprehensive and direct account of the life and achievements of

Emperor Kharavela, one of ancient India's most formidable yet elusive rulers. It fills a crucial gap in our understanding of the post-Mauryan period in eastern India.

- **Kalinga's Political Power:** The inscription unequivocally demonstrates Kalinga's resurgence as a powerful kingdom under Kharavela, challenging major contemporary powers like Magadha and the Satavahanas. It highlights Kalinga's political independence and military strength.
- **Cultural and Religious History:** Kharavela's strong patronage of Jainism, explicitly stated in the inscription (mentioning his devotion to Arhats and his bringing back of a Jain idol), makes it a vital source for the history of Jainism in eastern India. It also reflects Kalinga's distinct cultural identity.
- **Public Works and Administration:** Details about canal excavation (linking to the Nandas) and the rebuilding of the capital provide insights into ancient infrastructure projects and royal administration.
- **Early Prose Narrative:** As a continuous biographical prose narrative, it represents a remarkable early example of sophisticated royal record-keeping and eulogy, setting a precedent for later *prāśastis*.

Evolution of Early Odia Language and Script

The development of Odia from its Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) Prakrit base was a gradual process, influenced by regional factors and linguistic shifts.

1. **Magadhi Prakrit Influence:** Given Kalinga's historical proximity and interaction with Magadha, the regional Prakrit spoken in Kalinga likely shared characteristics with Magadhi Prakrit, the dialect used in many eastern Indian inscriptions. The Hati Gumpā inscription's language is often classified within this broader eastern Prakrit group, albeit with regional nuances.
2. **Transitional Phase (c. 1st Century BCE - 10th Century CE):** This long period saw the slow divergence of regional Prakrits into distinct Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) dialects and then into early forms of modern Indo-Aryan languages. While direct linguistic

evidence is sparse, the Hati Gumpha inscription provides the earliest hints of this regional linguistic identity. Later inscriptions from Odisha, especially from the 4th-5th centuries CE onwards (e.g., from the Mathara and Early Ganga dynasties), begin to show more distinct features that are closer to Old Odia, though still heavily influenced by Sanskrit.

3. **Emergence of Proto-Odia and Old Odia (c. 10th-12th Century CE):** By the 10th-12th centuries CE, the language of inscriptions from Odisha becomes recognizably Old Odia, exhibiting clear morphological, phonological, and lexical features that distinguish it from Bengali, Assamese, or other neighboring Indo-Aryan languages. This period also coincides with the rise of indigenous Odia literary traditions.

4. **Script Development from Brahmi to Early Odia:**

- **Early Brahmi in Kalinga:** Ashokan edicts in Dhauli and Jaugada (Odisha) are in Brahmi, establishing its early presence in the region.
- **Hati Gumpha Brahmi:** The script of the Hati Gumpha inscription, while broadly Brahmi, has specific stylistic features unique to Kalinga in the 2nd-1st century BCE. These include certain angularities and flourishes that foreshadow later developments.
- **Post-Gupta Period (c. 6th-10th Century CE):** From the Gupta period onwards, the northern Brahmi (Gupta Brahmi) evolved into various regional scripts. In Odisha, a distinct branch of this script, often referred to as **Kalinga script** or **Proto-Odia script**, began to emerge. This script, under the patronage of dynasties like the Bhauma-Karas and later the Somavamshis and Eastern Gangas, developed increasing curvilinearity, a characteristic feature of the later Odia script. The heads of the letters became more rounded, and the overall appearance became more flowing.
- **Final Differentiation (c. 11th-12th Century CE):** By this time, the Odia script had largely acquired its distinct appearance, clearly separable from Bengali or Devanagari. Its characteristic rounded forms, particularly the 'hooked' top strokes, became prominent.

Content and Societal Insights from Early Odia Inscriptions

Beyond the Hati Gumpah, other early inscriptions from Odisha, primarily in Sanskrit but often with Odia elements or local contexts, provide crucial insights:

1. **Royal Charters and Land Grants:** Similar to other regions, many inscriptions record royal grants of land to Brahmins, temples, and religious institutions. These copper plate inscriptions (e.g., from the Mathara, Early Ganga, Bhauma-Kara, and Somavamshi dynasties) provide:
 - **Administrative Structures:** Details about administrative divisions (e.g., *vishayas*, *bhuktis*), officials, and revenue collection.
 - **Land Tenure Systems:** Information on types of land, land measures, and rights of beneficiaries.
 - **Socio-Economic Conditions:** Insights into agrarian society, caste structures, and economic activities.
2. **Religious Patronage:** The inscriptions reveal the evolving religious landscape of Odisha. While Kharavela was a staunch Jain patron, later inscriptions show the rise of Brahmanism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. Temple building activities, as recorded in these inscriptions, illustrate the shift in dominant religious traditions and the patronage of various deities.
3. **Dynastic History:** The inscriptions are the primary source for reconstructing the chronologies and political histories of numerous dynasties that ruled Kalinga/Odisha, including the Matharas, Early Gangas, Bhauma-Karas, Somavamshis, and the Imperial Gangas. They detail their conquests, matrimonial alliances, and territories.
4. **Cultural and Artistic Heritage:** Many inscriptions are found on or relate to monumental architectural achievements, especially temples (e.g., Lingaraja Temple, Konark Sun Temple). They provide context for the rich sculptural and architectural traditions of Odisha.
5. **Evidence of Sanskritization:** The increasing use of Sanskrit in inscriptions from the Gupta period onwards reflects a process of Sanskritization, where the classical language gained prestige and became the preferred medium for official records and religious texts among the elite. However, the presence of local Prakrit/Odia elements alongside Sanskrit indicates a dynamic linguistic environment.

Challenges in Studying Early Odia Epigraphy

1. **Linguistic Transition:** Distinguishing between late Prakrit, proto-Odia, and early Old Odia can be challenging, as the linguistic evolution was gradual. This requires specialized linguistic analysis.
2. **Sanskrit Dominance:** For a significant period, many inscriptions from Odisha were predominantly in Sanskrit, making it harder to find extensive texts in pure Old Odia until much later. The focus then shifts to identifying Odia elements or features within these Sanskrit texts.
3. **Paleographical Variations:** The script undergoes considerable stylistic changes from Brahmi to Proto-Odia and finally to Old Odia, requiring expert paleographical knowledge for accurate dating and reading.
4. **Fragmentary Nature:** Many copper plates or stone inscriptions are incomplete, damaged, or suffer from corrosion, making full reconstruction difficult.
5. **Limited Early Pure Odia Corpus:** Compared to Tamil or Kannada, the corpus of undisputed, purely Old Odia inscriptions from before the 11th-12th centuries CE is relatively smaller, making it difficult to build a comprehensive linguistic profile for the very early stages.

Despite these challenges, the rigorous work of epigraphists and linguists continues to shed light on Odisha's ancient past. The work of scholars like Snigdha Tripathy, P.C. Mohapatra, and Satyanarayan Rajguru has been instrumental in this field.

The **Early Odia inscriptions**, stretching from the proto-Odia hints in the **Hati Gumph Inscription of Kharavela (c. 2nd-1st Century BCE)** to the more clearly defined Old Odia texts of later centuries, are fundamental to understanding **Utkala's Literary Heritage**. While the Hati Gumph, primarily in Prakrit, offers the earliest glimpse into the linguistic landscape of ancient Kalinga, its detailed narrative of a powerful monarch, Kharavela, also illuminates the region's political might, Jain patronage, and administrative prowess. This monumental

biography sets the stage for a unique regional identity that would eventually blossom into the distinct Odia language and script.



Figure 8: Hati Gumpa Inscription of Kharavela (c. 2nd-1st Century BCE)

The subsequent evolution of the Brahmi script into the curvilinear forms of Early Odia, coupled with the gradual linguistic shift from Prakrit to Old Odia by the early medieval period, is meticulously documented in these epigraphical records. These inscriptions, predominantly royal charters and land grants, serve as primary sources for reconstructing the dynastic histories of Kalinga, detailing social customs, land tenure systems, and the evolving religious landscape of the region. Through these invaluable records, etched in stone and metal, we trace the profound journey of the Odia language from its ancient roots to its distinct identity, preserving the rich and vibrant literary heritage of Utkala for millennia. The study of Early Odia epigraphy is thus indispensable for comprehending the historical, cultural, and linguistic foundations of modern Odisha.

4.3 Early Bengali-Assamese: Eastern Scriptural Roots

The northeastern region of the Indian subcontinent, encompassing modern-day Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam, is home to a vibrant linguistic and cultural heritage. The languages spoken here, primarily Bengali and Assamese, belong to the Indo-Aryan family, sharing a common ancestry that ultimately traces back to Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) through various Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrit and Apabhramsha) stages. The formative period of these languages and their distinctive scripts is illuminated by **Early Bengali-Assamese inscriptions**, which collectively represent the **Eastern Scriptural Roots** of this region. These epigraphs, predominantly royal copper plate grants, offer invaluable insights into the linguistic transition from a common Magadhan Prakrit base to the nascent forms of Proto-Bengali and Proto-Assamese, and the simultaneous evolution of their unique

script, a derivative of Gupta Brahmi. Among the most significant early examples for this region are the **Kamrup Grants of Bhaskaravarman**, which, despite being primarily in Sanskrit, exhibit crucial paleographical and linguistic features that foreshadow the emergence of independent Bengali and Assamese identities. The linguistic history of the Eastern Indo-Aryan languages (Magadhan or Gaudiya Prakrit derivatives) is complex, characterized by a long period of shared evolution before the emergence of distinct Bengali, Assamese, Odia, and Maithili languages. The political and geographical consolidation of regions, coupled with local linguistic innovations, gradually led to their individualization. Epigraphical records are the primary means of tracing this subtle yet profound transformation.

Language Family/Script

The language of these early inscriptions is primarily **Indo-Aryan (Proto-Bengali/Assamese)**, indicating a transitional linguistic stage where the common linguistic features that would later differentiate into Bengali and Assamese were beginning to crystallize. While often written in Sanskrit, these inscriptions reveal phonetic and grammatical traits of the evolving vernacular. The script employed is **Proto-Bengali Script**, which is a direct **derivative of Gupta Brahmi**. This script, also known as **Gaudiya script** in its later stages, served as the common ancestor for both Bengali and Assamese scripts, as well as several other regional scripts of Eastern India. It carries the fundamental characteristics of an abugida (consonant with inherent vowel, modified by diacritics) and is written from left to right.

Example Inscription: Kamrup Grant of Bhaskaravarman

The **Kamrup Grants of Bhaskaravarman** (specifically, the Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription is one of the most well-known) are highly significant for understanding the early history of Assam (ancient Kamrup) and the linguistic-scriptural development of the entire Eastern India.

- **Approximate Date:** The Kamrup Grants of Bhaskaravarman are generally dated to **c. 7th Century CE**. This dating is based on paleographical analysis, comparing the script style with other dated inscriptions of the Late Gupta and Post-Gupta periods, and historical evidence concerning King Bhaskaravarman himself. This places them in the early medieval period, a crucial time for the emergence of regional identities and vernacular languages across India.

- **Location:** These grants were issued from **Kamarupa (Kamrup), in Northeastern India (modern Assam)**, the seat of the Varman dynasty. While the specific finding locations of individual plates vary (e.g., Nidhanpur in Sylhet, Bangladesh, which was historically part of Kamrup), they relate to the administration and patronage within the ancient Kamrup kingdom.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - Sanskrit with early Bengali/Assamese phonetic traits):**
These copper plate grants are meticulously detailed legal documents. They typically record **land grants (agraharas)** made by kings to Brahmins (often learned scholars), to religious institutions (temples or monasteries), or sometimes to officials. The language is predominantly Sanskrit, often in a highly elaborate and poetic style (*praśasti*). However, a careful linguistic analysis of these Sanskrit texts reveals **early phonetic and grammatical features that subtly foreshadow Proto-Bengali and Proto-Assamese**. These include:
 - Certain pronunciation features (e.g., changes in vowel sounds, loss of intervocalic consonants) that are characteristic of the Eastern Indo-Aryan group.
 - Specific lexical choices or word forms that differ from standard Classical Sanskrit and show regional influences.
 - While not purely in vernacular, the substrate influence of the developing regional Prakrit/Apabhramsha is discernible.

Illustrative (simplified) content from such grants, to show the nature of the Sanskrit text: "svasti || śrīmān bhāskaravarmā bhūpālo balavān mahān / yo dravīṇa-daṇḍa-yugme prāpto'nyām jayanādapi // sa vijitya samastām gaudadeśīyām bhūmim grāmaṁ prādāt dvijebhyaḥ śāsanenā niyamena ca..." (Hail! The glorious and powerful great king Bhaskaravarman / Who, having obtained victory through both wealth and force / Having conquered all the land of Gauda / Granted the village to the Brahmins by charter and regulation...)

The grants also often contain detailed descriptions of the granted land (boundaries, features), the duties and privileges of the donees, and imprecatory verses (curses) against those who might violate the grant in the future. The Kamrup grants are particularly important as they

provide a continuous genealogy of the Varman dynasty, their political achievements, and their religious patronage.

- **Significance:** These grants are **crucial for tracing the development of the distinct Bengali and Assamese scripts and languages from their common Magadhan Prakrit and later Sanskrit base.**
 - **Paleographical Evidence:** The script employed in these grants is a key example of the **Proto-Bengali Script**, which directly evolved from Late Gupta Brahmi. It exhibits transitional features – a loosening of the more angular Gupta style, increasing curvilinearity, and the emergence of distinct letter forms that are ancestral to both the Bengali and Assamese alphabets. Scholars study these subtle changes to delineate the precise evolutionary path of the script.
 - **Linguistic Substratum:** Although the dominant language is Sanskrit, the phonetic and sometimes morphological peculiarities embedded within the Sanskrit texts (especially in proper nouns, place names, and common nouns) provide crucial evidence of the developing vernacular. They allow linguists to reconstruct features of the Proto-Bengali/Assamese language spoken at the time.
 - **Early Medieval Socio-Economic and Political Landscape:** These grants offer unparalleled insights into the **early medieval socio-economic and political landscape of Eastern India**, particularly the Kamrup kingdom. They detail:
 - **Royal Patronage:** The practice of making land grants to Brahmins (Brahmadeya) was a significant aspect of state policy, aiming to legitimize royal authority, spread Brahmanical culture, and integrate new territories.
 - **Agrarian Economy:** The grants provide details about land ownership, land types, agricultural practices, and revenue administration.

- **Social Structures:** The mention of different castes, professions, and the privileges granted to donees helps understand the social hierarchy and mobility.
- **Political History:** The grants are vital for constructing the dynastic history of the Varman rulers of Kamrup, their territorial extent, and their relationships with neighboring kingdoms. Bhaskaravarman, a contemporary of Harshavardhana, was a significant ruler whose political alliances and conquests are documented.
- **Religious Practices:** They reveal the dominant religious affiliations of the ruling class (often Shaivism or Vaishnavism) and the patronage extended to religious institutions.

Evolution of Early Bengali-Assamese Language and Script

The linguistic and scriptural evolution in Eastern India followed a multi-stage process:

1. **Magadhi Prakrit Base (Pre-5th Century CE):** The primary Middle Indo-Aryan dialect spoken in Eastern India was Magadhi Prakrit, from which all modern Eastern Indo-Aryan languages (Bengali, Assamese, Odia, Maithili, etc.) are believed to have originated. Early inscriptions, like the Ashokan edicts in Odisha (though not directly Bengal/Assam), confirm the presence of Prakrit.
2. **Transitional Phase (c. 5th - 10th Century CE) - Apabhramsha Stage:** This period is characterized by the evolution of Prakrits into various Apabhramshas, which were the immediate ancestors of the modern Indo-Aryan vernaculars. The local Apabhramsha in Eastern India, known as Magadhi Apabhramsha or Gaudiya Apabhramsha, gradually developed unique features. While Sanskrit remained the language of most official inscriptions, the influence of this evolving vernacular began to subtly manifest in the orthography and occasional lexical items.
3. **Proto-Bengali/Assamese (c. 7th - 12th Century CE):** This is the period when the distinct features that would later differentiate Bengali and Assamese began to emerge. The Kamrup grants fall squarely within this era. Key linguistic characteristics include:
 - **Vowel Changes:** Tendency towards vowel harmony and raising.

- **Consonant Changes:** Loss of certain intervocalic consonants, development of geminates.
 - **Loss of Grammatical Gender:** A general trend in Eastern Indo-Aryan languages.
 - **Simplified Case System:** Reduction in the complex case system of Sanskrit.
 - **Vocabulary:** Emergence of local vocabulary and specific lexical choices.
4. **Old Bengali/Assamese (c. 10th - 14th Century CE):** By the 10th century, the language of literary works (e.g., *Charyapada*, the earliest extant Bengali/Assamese Buddhist mystic songs) and some inscriptions becomes clearly identifiable as Old Bengali or Old Assamese. This marks the full emergence of the distinct languages.
5. **Script Evolution - Gupta Brahmi to Proto-Bengali/Assamese:**
- **Late Gupta Brahmi (c. 5th-6th Century CE):** The direct ancestor. This script was prevalent across Northern India during the Gupta Empire, characterized by its formal and often angular forms.
 - **Proto-Bengali Script / Gaudiya Script (c. 7th - 12th Century CE):** This script developed from Late Gupta Brahmi in Eastern India. Its key evolutionary features include:
 - **Increased Curvilinearity:** A gradual shift from the angularity of Gupta Brahmi to more rounded and flowing letter forms. This is clearly visible in the Kamrup grants.
 - **Standardized Heads:** The formation of a distinctive 'head' or top stroke for many letters, which would evolve into the triangular head-mark characteristic of later Bengali and Assamese scripts.
 - **Conjunctive Consonants:** Development of a sophisticated system for ligatures (conjunct consonants), often forming complex clusters.
 - **Stylistic Similarities:** For a significant period, the script used in Bengal, Assam, and parts of Odisha shared many similarities, making it difficult to differentiate them clearly until later.

- **Early Bengali and Assamese Scripts (c. 13th-14th Century CE onwards):**
By this period, the common Proto-Bengali script began to bifurcate into more distinct Bengali and Assamese forms, though they remain very close. The modern Bengali and Assamese scripts, with their characteristic head-strokes and rounded bodies, are direct descendants of this Gaudiya script.

Other Significant Early Inscriptions of the Region

While Bhaskaravarman's grants are pivotal, other inscriptions from the region provide crucial corroborating evidence:

1. **Gunaighar Copper Plate of Vainyagupta (c. 507 CE):** From southeastern Bengal, this inscription is an early example of a Gupta-era land grant primarily in Sanskrit. Its script is Late Gupta Brahmi, serving as a direct precursor to the Proto-Bengali script seen later.
2. **Faridpur Copper Plates (c. late 6th - early 7th Century CE):** These grants from the Gopa Chandra, Dharmaditya, and Samacharadeva kings of Samatata (southeastern Bengal) are in Sanskrit and use a script that is transitional between Late Gupta Brahmi and early Gaudiya. They provide important historical data for early independent kingdoms in Bengal.
3. **Khadga Dynasty Plates (c. 7th Century CE):** Inscriptions from the Khadga dynasty in southeastern Bengal also show further evolution of the Proto-Bengali script and provide insight into their Buddhist patronage.
4. **Pala Period Inscriptions (c. 8th - 12th Century CE):** The Pala Empire, a dominant power in Bengal and Bihar, left behind numerous Sanskrit inscriptions (e.g., Khalimpur Copper Plate of Dharmapala, Badal Pillar Inscription). These inscriptions extensively use the Gaudiya script, showcasing its mature form and its widespread use in the region. While primarily Sanskrit, they reflect the socio-political and cultural dynamics of the era when Old Bengali was flourishing.
5. **Chandrapur Copper Plate (Assam, c. 12th Century CE):** This grant, though later, clearly showcases a more evolved form of the Assamese script, further solidifying the distinctiveness of the regional script.

These inscriptions collectively illustrate the gradual yet distinct evolution of both the language and script in the Eastern Indo-Aryan belt. They show a continuous lineage from the common Brahmi ancestor through its Gupta variant to the specific Proto-Bengali script that served as the common foundation for Bengali and Assamese.

Content and Societal Insights from Early Bengali-Assamese Inscriptions

These grants and inscriptions offer a wealth of information about the early medieval period in Eastern India:

1. **Agrarian Economy and Land Ownership:** The detailed descriptions of land grants (boundaries, types of land, villages) provide insights into the agrarian structure, land tenure systems, and the importance of agricultural economy. They show how land was surveyed, measured, and transferred.
2. **Administrative Structures:** The inscriptions often mention various administrative divisions (e.g., *mandala*, *vishaya*, *bhukti*) and officials (e.g., *mahasamanta*, *mahāsenāpati*, *dūtaka*), helping to reconstruct the administrative hierarchy and governance practices of the early medieval kingdoms.
3. **Brahmanical Settlement and Religious Patronage:** The majority of land grants were *brahmadeyas* (grants to Brahmins) or *devadānas* (grants to temples). This indicates the increasing settlement of Brahmins in newly acquired or developed areas, their role in legitimizing royal authority, and the growing patronage of Brahmanical Hinduism (Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism) by the ruling elites.
4. **Social Stratification and Mobility:** While not explicitly detailing social classes, the mention of different donees (Brahmins, merchants, officials) and their privileges provides glimpses into the social hierarchy and economic roles within society.
5. **Political History and Dynastic Genealogies:** These inscriptions are indispensable for reconstructing the political history of the region. They provide regnal years, dynastic lists, military achievements, and territorial claims of dynasties like the Varmans of Kamrup, the later Pala rulers of Bengal, and various independent local chiefs. They help fill gaps in historical narratives where other sources are scarce.

6. **Cultural and Religious Life:** Beyond patronage, the invocations at the beginning of the grants reveal the religious affiliations of the rulers. The descriptions of temples and deities contribute to understanding the prevailing religious beliefs and practices.
7. **Linguistic Insights:** The subtle presence of Proto-Bengali/Assamese features within the Sanskrit framework, especially in proper nouns and place names, is a goldmine for historical linguists. It allows them to trace phonetic changes, morphological innovations, and the gradual divergence of the Eastern Indo-Aryan languages.

Challenges in Studying Early Bengali-Assamese Epigraphy

1. **Sanskrit Dominance:** The overwhelming majority of these early inscriptions are in Sanskrit. Extracting the linguistic features of the nascent vernacular requires careful and nuanced analysis, often focusing on non-Sanskrit words or subtle orthographical variations.
2. **Paleographical Complexity:** The Proto-Bengali script is a transitional one, displaying features of both its Gupta Brahmi ancestor and its later developed forms. Accurate reading and dating require specialized paleographical expertise, and distinguishing between regional stylistic nuances can be challenging.
3. **Fragmentary Nature and Deterioration:** Many copper plates suffer from corrosion, damage, or loss of sections, making complete decipherment difficult. Stone inscriptions can be weathered.
4. **Interpreting Technical Terms:** Land grant documents often contain complex technical terms related to land measurement, revenue, and local administration, which require historical and legal expertise for accurate interpretation.
5. **Scarcity of Pure Vernacular Texts:** Unlike Tamil-Brahmi which has pure Tamil texts, the earliest Bengali/Assamese inscriptions are not purely in the vernacular. The earliest *literary* texts (like *Charyapada*) appear later (c. 10th-12th century CE). This makes the task of tracing language evolution purely from inscriptions more indirect.

Despite these challenges, the rigorous work of epigraphists and historical linguists (such as Dinesh Chandra Sircar, R.C. Majumdar, Sukumar Sen for Bengali, and Maheswar Neog, Dimbeswar Neog for Assamese) has been instrumental in piecing together the early history of the Bengali and Assamese languages and scripts.

The **Early Bengali-Assamese inscriptions**, exemplified by the **Kamrup Grants of Bhaskaravarman (c. 7th Century CE)**, are indispensable for understanding the **Eastern Scriptural Roots** of these distinct Indo-Aryan languages. While predominantly composed in Sanskrit, these copper plate grants serve as crucial linguistic and paleographical bridges, showcasing the subtle yet unmistakable influence of the evolving Proto-Bengali/Assamese language. Their script, a direct derivative of Late Gupta Brahmi known as Proto-Bengali or Gaudiya, clearly demonstrates the transitional forms that would eventually lead to the elegant and distinctive alphabets of modern Bengali and Assamese.

Beyond their profound linguistic and scriptural significance, these grants offer a rich and detailed canvas of the early medieval socio-economic and political landscape of Eastern India. They illuminate the intricate systems of royal land grants, the agrarian economy, administrative structures, and the pervasive influence of Brahmanical patronage that shaped the region. The Kamrup grants, in particular, provide invaluable insights into the history of ancient Assam, its ruling dynasties, and its interactions with the broader Indian subcontinent.

The study of these early inscriptions is a meticulous endeavor, requiring the careful discernment of vernacular traces within Sanskrit texts and an expert understanding of evolving paleography. Nevertheless, they collectively stand as vital primary sources, narrating the gradual emergence of a distinct cultural and linguistic identity in Eastern India. These ancient records, etched in enduring copper and stone, are not merely historical documents; they are the tangible genesis of **Utkala's Literary Heritage** and the vibrant textual traditions that continue to flourish in Bengal and Assam today.

4.4 Early Marathi: Maharashtra's Inscriptional Dawn

The linguistic tapestry of India is remarkably diverse, with each major region boasting its own unique linguistic lineage. In the heartland of the Deccan, the state of Maharashtra is defined by the vibrant **Marathi language**, an Indo-Aryan tongue with a rich historical and literary tradition. The earliest evidence of this language in written form is found in **Early Marathi inscriptions**, which represent **Maharashtra's Inscriptional Dawn**. These epigraphical records are crucial for tracing the journey of Marathi from its Middle Indo-Aryan (Apabhramsha) antecedents to its distinct identity. While comprehensive Old Marathi texts emerge later, these early inscriptions, often found in a mixed linguistic environment, provide invaluable glimpses into the nascent stages of the language and its script. Among these foundational records, certain inscriptions at **Shravanabelagola**, primarily known for their

Kannada content, hold particular significance for containing some of the earliest clear examples of Old Marathi phrases or verses. Marathi, like other Indo-Aryan languages of Northern and Central India, evolved from Sanskrit through various Prakrit and Apabhramsha stages. Geographically positioned at the crossroads of North and South India, Maharashtra has historically been a melting pot of cultural and linguistic influences. The emergence of Marathi as a distinct language was a gradual process, likely solidifying between the 9th and 11th centuries CE. Epigraphical evidence is key to understanding this evolution, as it provides dated and localized examples of the language in use.

Language Family/Script

The language of these early inscriptions is **Indo-Aryan (Old Marathi)**. This represents the initial phase of the Marathi language, distinct from its later medieval and modern forms. The script employed is **Early Devanagari/Nagari Script**, which evolved from the Siddhamātrikā script (a descendant of Gupta Brahmi). Nagari script gradually developed its characteristic squared-off forms and was the ancestor of modern Devanagari. In its early stages, the script used for Marathi often shared similarities with contemporary scripts for other North Indian languages before fully differentiating into the distinct Marathi variant of Devanagari (often called Balbodh script). As an abugida, it follows the Brahmi principle of a basic consonant carrying an inherent vowel, with diacritics for other vowel modifications. It is typically written from left to right.

Example Inscription: Shravanabelagola Inscription (Bahubali/Gommata Hill Inscriptions)

While Shravanabelagola in Karnataka is predominantly famous for its monumental Kannada inscriptions related to Jainism, it surprisingly harbors some of the earliest and clearest instances of Old Marathi.

This highlights the linguistic interconnectedness of the Deccan region in the early medieval period.

- **Approximate Date:** The specific inscription referring to Chamundaraja, which contains Old Marathi phrases, is generally dated to **c. 983 CE**. This date corresponds to the consecration of the colossal Bahubali (Gommata) statue itself. While scholars debate whether any earlier fragmented references to Marathi exist (e.g., some theories suggest Marathi elements in inscriptions from the 8th or 9th century, like the Patne

inscription from Nashik or fragments from Akshi), the Shravanabelagola inscription provides one of the earliest extensive and unambiguous examples of Old Marathi.

- **Location:** These inscriptions are found on **Vindhyagiri Hill (Bahubali/Gommata Hill)** at **Shravanabelagola, in the Hassan district of Karnataka**. Shravanabelagola is one of the most important pilgrimage centers for Jains in India, famous for its colossal monolithic statue of Bahubali, constructed under the patronage of the Ganga minister and general Chamundaraja. The location in a historical Jain center, rather than a political capital, is significant as Jain monks often played a crucial role in the development and spread of regional languages.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - Old Marathi):** "Chāmuṇḍarāje karaviyale. Ganga rāje suttūru..." (Chamundaraja caused this to be done. Ganga Raja, Sutturu...)

A more complete context for the Marathi phrase, often found alongside Kannada, within the larger inscription on the statue's base: The colossal Bahubali statue has inscriptions in two languages: **Old Kannada** and **Old Marathi**. The Marathi inscription is a very short, two-line text located near the feet of the statue. It serves as a brief record of the statue's commission. The full inscription related to Chamundaraja's work reads, in essence: "Śrī Cāmuṇḍarājem karaviyale." (Glorious Chamundaraja caused it to be done.) And a further part might mention: "Ganga rāje suttūru karaviyale." (Ganga king caused Sutturu to be done) or similar variations, indicating different phases of work or different patrons.



Figure 9: Shravanabelagola Inscription

○ **Significance:**

- **Early Evidence of Old Marathi:** While primarily known for its extensive Kannada inscriptions, the presence of these **short but clear inscriptions in Old Marathi at Shravanabelagola** is profoundly significant. They are among the **earliest undisputed examples of the Marathi language in its written form**, providing concrete linguistic data for its nascent stage. This makes the Shravanabelagola complex not just a site for Kannada studies, but also a crucial resource for early Marathi linguistics.
- **Linguistic Studies:** The distinct Old Marathi phrases, even if brief, allow linguists to study the phonetic and grammatical features of the language from the late 10th century CE. It highlights its presence and early written usage alongside the more established Kannada in a Jain context. It shows nascent Marathi morphology and vocabulary, indicating its divergence from the Apabhramsha stage.
- **Regional Interconnections:** The bilingual nature of the inscriptions (Kannada and Marathi) at such a significant site underscores the linguistic and cultural fluidity of the Deccan region in the early medieval period. It reflects the movements of Jain monks, artists, and patrons across geographical and linguistic boundaries between Karnataka and Maharashtra. Jainism played a vital role in patronizing and promoting vernacular languages in both regions.
- **Historical Context:** Although the Marathi inscription itself is brief, it ties into the grand historical narrative of the construction of the Bahubali statue by Chamundaraja, a Ganga minister. This feat of engineering and religious devotion is a major event in Jain history and Deccan art.
- **Jain Patronage of Vernaculars:** The use of Old Marathi in this significant Jain context reinforces the pattern observed in other parts of India, where Jainism (and Buddhism) often adopted and promoted vernacular languages for their scriptures and records, making them accessible to a wider populace, unlike the often Sanskrit-dominated Brahmanical traditions.

Origins and Evolution of Marathi Language and Script

The evolution of Marathi, like other modern Indo-Aryan languages, is traced through the following stages:

1. **Old Indo-Aryan (Vedic and Classical Sanskrit):** The ultimate ancestor of Marathi.
2. **Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrits):**
 - **Maharashtri Prakrit:** This is the most direct and significant Prakrit ancestor of Marathi. It was a widely spoken and literary Prakrit, extensively used in poetic and dramatic works from the early centuries CE. Marathi inherits many of its phonological and grammatical features directly from Maharashtri Prakrit.
 - **Apabhramsha:** From Maharashtri Prakrit, the language evolved into a form of Apabhramsha (the transitional stage between MIA and NIA). This Apabhramsha, specifically known as **Western Apabhramsha** or **Maharashtri Apabhramsha**, is the immediate ancestor of Old Marathi. Features like the loss of intervocalic consonants, certain vowel changes, and simplified morphology characterize this stage.
3. **Old Marathi (c. 9th-14th Century CE):** This marks the emergence of Marathi as a distinct language.
 - **Early Inscriptional Evidence:** As seen in Shravanabelagola, some early inscriptions show nascent Marathi features from the late 10th century. Earlier fragments (e.g., the Patne inscription from Nashik, c. 8th century, or inscriptions from the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas) sometimes contain Marathi proper nouns, place names, or short phrases, but often within a predominantly Sanskrit or Kannada context. The Shravanabelagola example is notable for being a clear statement in Marathi.
 - **Literary Flourishing:** From the late 12th and 13th centuries onwards, Marathi developed a rich literary tradition with works by saint-poets like Dnyaneshwar (Jnaneshvari, c. 1290 CE), Namdev, and others, firmly establishing Old Marathi as a literary language. This period is often considered the true "dawn" of literary Marathi.

4. **Middle Marathi (c. 14th-17th Century CE):** Further evolution, leading to the language of the Mahanubhava and Warkari sects.
5. **Modern Marathi (c. 17th Century CE onwards):** Development of modern Marathi.

Script Evolution: Brahmi to Early Devanagari/Nagari

The script used for early Marathi inscriptions also evolved through distinct phases:

1. **Early Brahmi:** The ultimate ancestor of all Indic scripts.
2. **Western Indian Brahmi/Early Gupta Brahmi (c. 4th-6th Century CE):** Inscriptions of the Vakatakas, Early Chalukyas, and Rashtrakutas in Maharashtra primarily used a script that was a regional variant of Gupta Brahmi. This script shows nascent forms of later Nagari characters.
3. **Siddhamātrikā Script (c. 7th-9th Century CE):** This script evolved from Gupta Brahmi across North and Central India. It is characterized by its more angular forms and a clear development towards the individual characters of Nagari. Many Rashtrakuta copper plates from Maharashtra exhibit this script.
4. **Early Nagari/Devanagari (c. 10th Century CE onwards):** By the 10th century, the Nagari script began to solidify its characteristic features, including the prominent horizontal head-stroke (shirorekhā) and more uniform letter shapes. This is the script used for the Shravanabelagola Marathi inscription. While initially common across a wider region, it would eventually develop into distinct regional forms, including the specific Marathi variant of Devanagari (Balbodh).
5. **Modi Script:** Alongside Devanagari, a cursive script called Modi (मोडी) was developed specifically for Marathi from the 17th century onwards, primarily for administrative and quick writing purposes. However, early inscriptions largely use the Nagari script.

Other Significant Early Marathi Inscriptions (Before full literary flowering)

While Shravanabelagola is crucial, other inscriptions provide important early linguistic fragments or insights:

1. **Patne Inscription (Nashik district, c. 8th century CE):** This fragmented inscription, attributed to the Rashtrakutas, contains some of the earliest proposed Marathi words or phrases, though interpretation can be challenging due to its brevity and damaged state.

2. **Shirale Inscription (Satara district, c. 10th century CE):** Another very early inscription with Marathi elements, often cited alongside Shravanabelagola.
3. **Dhanashreshthi's Inscription (c. 1049 CE):** Found in the Gondeshwar temple at Sinnar (Nashik district), this inscription contains a short Marathi passage at the end, confirming a donation, indicating the increasing use of Marathi in official documents.
4. **Vadgaon-Maval (Pune district, c. 1060 CE):** This inscription provides a clear example of Old Marathi prose in a land grant context.
5. **Chaul Inscription (Raigad district, c. 1118 CE):** This is a relatively longer inscription, predominantly in Sanskrit but containing significant Marathi portions, including the details of a commercial transaction, showcasing the language's use in practical, legal contexts.

These inscriptions collectively illustrate the gradual emergence of Marathi from its Apabhramsha roots, initially appearing as isolated words or phrases within Sanskrit or Kannada contexts, and then evolving into more complete passages. They demonstrate that by the 11th and 12th centuries, Marathi was a functional written language, ready for its full literary efflorescence.

Content and Societal Insights from Early Marathi Inscriptions

The limited but significant corpus of early Marathi inscriptions offers valuable insights into the socio-economic, political, and religious landscape of ancient Maharashtra:

1. **Religious Patronage:** Many early inscriptions, like the one at Shravanabelagola, are associated with religious endowments or construction activities, primarily for Jainism, and later for various Hindu sects (Shaivism, Vaishnavism). This highlights the role of religious institutions as centers of learning and patronage, and the devotion of rulers and commoners.
2. **Land Grants and Donations:** The majority of copper plate inscriptions record land grants (*dānaśāsanas*) to Brahmins, temples, or individuals. These documents provide details about:
 - **Agrarian Economy:** The prevalence of agricultural land grants underscores the agrarian nature of the economy.

- **Revenue Systems:** Information about taxes, levies, and land measurements, though often in Sanskrit, gives clues about administrative practices.
 - **Local Administration:** Mentions of local officials and administrative units offer insights into regional governance.
3. **Political Landscape:** While few early Marathi inscriptions are grand royal *praśastis*, they mention the names of local chieftains, feudatories, or royal families (e.g., Yadavas of Devagiri, Shilaharas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas). This helps in reconstructing the political map of Maharashtra and the power dynamics of the early medieval period.
 4. **Socio-Economic Life:** Inscriptions that record commercial transactions (like the Chaul inscription) provide rare glimpses into early trade, economic activities, and the role of merchant guilds. They also implicitly reveal social hierarchies through the status of donors and donees.
 5. **Linguistic Evolution:** The primary significance remains linguistic. These inscriptions offer critical data points for historical phonology, morphology, and syntax of Old Marathi. They help pinpoint when certain phonetic changes occurred or specific grammatical constructions emerged, facilitating the tracing of Marathi's divergence from its Apabhramsha ancestor.
 6. **Inter-regional Cultural Exchange:** The presence of Marathi inscriptions in Karnataka (Shravanabelagola) and Kannada inscriptions in Maharashtra highlights the dynamic cultural and linguistic exchange across the Deccan, often facilitated by pan-Indian religious movements like Jainism.

Challenges in Studying Early Marathi Epigraphy

1. **Scarcity of Pure Texts:** A major challenge is the relative scarcity of extensive, purely Old Marathi inscriptions from the very early period (before the 12th century). Many are fragments or contain Marathi elements within a larger Sanskrit or Kannada text.
2. **Ambiguity of Early Features:** In the earliest phases, distinguishing between Apabhramsha, Proto-Marathi, and early Old Marathi can be subtle, requiring meticulous linguistic analysis to identify distinct Marathi features.

3. **Shared Script:** The early Nagari script was not exclusive to Marathi; it was used for several other Indo-Aryan languages. Differentiating early Marathi inscriptions relies heavily on the linguistic content rather than just the script.
4. **Weathering and Damage:** Many stone inscriptions are weathered or damaged over centuries, making decipherment difficult or incomplete. Copper plates can also suffer from corrosion.
5. **Debates on "Earliest":** The claim for the "earliest" Marathi inscription is a subject of ongoing scholarly debate, with various fragments and theories proposed. Shravanabelagola remains significant due to its relatively clear and extensive nature.

Despite these challenges, the work of epigraphists and linguists (such as Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi, G. V. Damle, S. G. Tulpule, and others) has been instrumental in illuminating the inscriptional dawn of Marathi.

The **Early Marathi inscriptions**, with the **Shravanabelagola inscription (c. 983 CE)** standing out as a pivotal example, represent the crucial **Inscriptional Dawn of Maharashtra's language**. While often brief and found in a multi-linguistic environment, these records provide the earliest unambiguous glimpses of Old Marathi in its written form, marking its gradual emergence from a common Apabhramsha heritage. The script, an early form of **Devanagari/Nagari**, indicates its shared lineage with other North Indian scripts while also displaying nascent features that would later define the distinctive Marathi orthography. The Shravanabelagola inscription, primarily known for its Kannada context, is invaluable for its inclusion of clear Old Marathi phrases, providing concrete linguistic data for the language's morphology and vocabulary in the late 10th century. This bilingual presence underscores the intense linguistic and cultural intermingling that characterized the Deccan in the early medieval period, with Jainism often serving as a catalyst for the patronage of vernacular languages. These early epigraphs, though modest in their linguistic extent, are indispensable primary sources for historical linguists, enabling them to trace the evolution of Marathi, understand its socio-religious context, and reconstruct the historical landscape of Maharashtra. They are not merely records etched in stone; they are the earliest whispers of a language that would blossom into a vibrant literary and cultural tradition, echoing through the centuries to define the identity of Maharashtra.

4.5 Early Gujarati-Rajasthani: Western India's Linguistic Evolution

The diverse linguistic landscape of Western India, encompassing the modern states of Gujarat and Rajasthan, is characterized by the vibrant **Gujarati** and **Rajasthani** languages. Both belong to the Indo-Aryan family, tracing their lineage back to Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) through various Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrit and Apabhramsha) stages. The emergence of these languages as distinct entities, sharing a common ancestor often termed **Old Gujarati-Rajasthani** (or Old Western Rajasthani), is a fascinating process that unfolds across centuries. While a definitive "earliest inscription" in purely Old Gujarati or Rajasthani, comparable to the Halmidi inscription for Kannada or Vazhappally for Malayalam, is elusive due to a prolonged transitional phase, the **linguistic evolution of Western India** is clearly discernible through a careful analysis of various texts, including **Jain manuscripts** and, crucially, **regional inscriptions** that, while often Sanskrit, increasingly reveal features of the developing vernacular. The **Veraval Inscription of Chaulukya King Bhima I (c. 1026 CE)** serves as an excellent illustrative example, showcasing the subtle yet significant presence of these emerging linguistic traits within a predominantly Sanskrit record. The linguistic history of Gujarati and Rajasthani is intricately intertwined. For a significant period, the dialects spoken in what is now Gujarat and Rajasthan were largely considered a single linguistic entity, often referred to as **Old Western Rajasthani (OWR)** or **Maru-Gurjar Apabhramsha**. This common linguistic phase is a testament to the shared cultural and historical interactions between these regions. The gradual divergence into separate Gujarati and Rajasthani languages occurred later, influenced by various socio-political, geographical, and literary developments.

Language Family/Script

The language of these early records is **Indo-Aryan (Old Gujarati/Rajasthani)**. This represents the immediate precursor stage to modern Gujarati and Rajasthani, often referred to as Old Western Rajasthani (OWR). It is characterized by specific phonological, morphological, and lexical features that distinguish it from other Apabhramsha dialects. The script employed is **Nagari Script**, which evolved from Siddhamātrikā, itself a derivative of Gupta Brahmi. This script, with its characteristic horizontal head-stroke, became the dominant script for writing Sanskrit and, increasingly, the vernaculars across much of North and Western India. In its early stages, the Nagari script used for OWR shared commonalities with contemporary scripts of other Indo-Aryan languages before developing the specific nuances seen in later Gujarati and Rajasthani scripts. It functions as an abugida, read from left to right.

The Challenge of "Earliest Inscription" and Alternative Evidence

Unlike some Southern Dravidian languages that show clear, distinct vernacular inscriptions at an early date, the emergence of a purely vernacular epigraphical tradition in Gujarati and Rajasthani is somewhat later. This is primarily due to:

1. **Dominance of Sanskrit:** Sanskrit remained the primary language of royal charters, religious endowments, and formal records across North and Western India for a longer period.
2. **Transitional Nature of Apabhramsha:** The transition from Apabhramsha to early New Indo-Aryan languages was gradual, and the vernacular often appeared first in literary contexts (e.g., Jaina texts) before making its way extensively into formal inscriptions.

Therefore, for the earliest linguistic forms akin to Old Gujarati/Rajasthani, scholars often rely on:

- **Jaina Texts and Commentaries:** A vast corpus of Jaina philosophical texts, commentaries, and narrative literature, often written in Apabhramsha or Early Old Gujarati/Rajasthani (e.g., *Bharatesvara Bahubali Ghora* by Vajrasena Suri, c. 1169 CE), provides invaluable linguistic evidence. These texts, written by Jaina monks who often wrote in the vernacular to reach a wider audience, are crucial for reconstructing the phonology, morphology, and syntax of OWR.
- **Later Regional Inscriptions (11th-12th centuries onwards):** From this period, inscriptions from Gujarat and Rajasthan, while often predominantly Sanskrit, increasingly incorporate local words, place names, proper nouns, and even grammatical structures that reflect the developing vernacular. These are vital for tracing the inscriptional dawn of Old Gujarati/Rajasthani.

Given the request for an inscriptional example, the **Veraval Inscription of Chaulukya King Bhima I** serves as an excellent illustration of these transitional features within a formal epigraphic context.

Alternative Inscriptional Example: Veraval Inscription of Chaulukya King Bhima I

The Veraval inscription, while primarily Sanskrit, is representative of the types of epigraphical records that showcase the nascent stages of Old Gujarati-Rajasthani.

- **Approximate Date:** The Veraval Inscription is securely dated to **c. 1026 CE**. This dating is based on internal references to the regnal year of Chaulukya King Bhima I, a significant ruler of the Solanki (Chaulukya) dynasty that dominated Gujarat. This places it firmly in the early 11th century CE, a critical period for the linguistic evolution in Western India.
- **Location:** The inscription is found in **Veraval, a coastal town in Gujarat**, historically an important port and trading center. The presence of the inscription in such a strategic location underscores its economic and administrative significance.
- **Content/Significance:**
 - **Text (Excerpt - Sanskrit with early Gujarati/Rajasthani influence in place names and syntax):** The Veraval inscription records a land grant made by Chaulukya King Bhima I. Like many royal charters of the period, it is predominantly in elaborate Sanskrit prose and verse, detailing the king's achievements, his piety, and the specific terms of the grant. However, it is within this Sanskrit framework that **the increasing presence of local words, place names, and subtle grammatical structures provides crucial evidence of the emergence of distinct Old Gujarati and Old Rajasthani forms**. These vernacular elements are typically found in:
 - **Toponyms (Place Names):** The names of villages, fields, or geographical features being granted often appear in their local vernacular forms rather than their Sanskritized equivalents.
 - **Personal Names:** Names of donees, witnesses, or local officials may reflect vernacular phonology and morphology.
 - **Technical Terms:** Certain administrative, land-measurement, or commercial terms might appear in their regional variant.
 - **Syntax and Phonetic Traits:** While subtle, some grammatical constructions or phonetic tendencies (e.g., specific vowel changes, or the treatment of certain consonants) within the Sanskrit text might betray a regional linguistic substrate.

Illustrative (simplified) content to show the nature of such a mixed text, focusing on the vernacular hints: "Om Namaḥ Śivāya || Samvat 1083 Vaiśākha śuddha tṛtīyāyām Adyēha [specific village name in local vernacular] grāmaṁ śrībhīmadevena [king's name] dattaṁ, sambaddhaṁ [local measure] vāḍau. Yatra [local land type] kṣetraṁ..." (Om, Salutations to Shiva! In the year 1083, on the third day of the bright half of Vaishakha, today, the village of [local name, e.g., 'Vāḍagam'] was granted by the glorious Bhima-deva, associated with a 'vāḍā' of [local measure]. Here is a field of [local land type, e.g., 'gorāḍā bhūmi']...)

○ **Significance:**

- **Linguistic Evolution in Action:** This type of inscription is highly significant because it captures the **process of linguistic evolution in action**. While not purely vernacular, the growing infiltration of local linguistic features into formal Sanskrit documents demonstrates that a distinct vernacular (OWR) was consolidating and gaining enough prominence to influence official records. It helps scholars trace the gradual shift from Sanskrit dominance to vernacular assertiveness.
- **Evidence of Old Gujarati/Rajasthani Features:** The vernacular elements found in these inscriptions (place names, terms) provide concrete phonological and lexical data for reconstructing Old Gujarati/Rajasthani. For instance, the use of certain local terms for land types, or the specific phonetic rendering of place names, helps establish the distinct identity of the language from this period.
- **Historical and Dynastic Information:** The Veraval inscription is a vital primary source for the history of the **Chaulukya (Solanki) dynasty of Gujarat**, particularly the reign of Bhima I. It provides details about the king's administrative actions, his religious patronage, and the socio-economic conditions of his kingdom.
- **Socio-Economic Insights:** As a land grant, it offers insights into land tenure systems, the agrarian economy, the role of Brahmins and religious institutions, and local administrative practices.
- **Regional Identity:** The presence of these inscriptions helps define the geographical extent and cultural sphere where Old Gujarati-Rajasthani

was developing, connecting epigraphical evidence to the nascent regional identities of Gujarat and Rajasthan.

Origins and Evolution of Gujarati and Rajasthani Languages and Script

The shared journey of Gujarati and Rajasthani can be outlined in these stages:

1. **Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit):** The ultimate source language.
2. **Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrits and Apabhramsha):**
 - **Sauraseni Prakrit:** The direct ancestor of the Western Indo-Aryan languages (including Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Rajasthani).
 - **Gurjar Apabhramsha / Maru-Gurjar Apabhramsha:** This specific Apabhramsha dialect, prevalent in Gujarat and Rajasthan from around the 8th to 12th centuries CE, is the immediate ancestor of Old Gujarati-Rajasthani. It was characterized by:
 - Loss of certain intervocalic consonants.
 - Simplification of consonant clusters.
 - Development of specific nominal and verbal inflections.
 - The rise of certain archaic sounds and grammatical forms that are crucial for identifying OWR.
3. **Old Gujarati-Rajasthani / Old Western Rajasthani (OWR) (c. 12th - 16th Century CE):** This is the stage where the language became distinct from other Apabhramshas and began to acquire recognizable features of both Gujarati and Rajasthani.
 - **Jaina Literary Texts:** The bulk of linguistic evidence for OWR comes from Jaina texts written during this period. Works like *Bharatesvara Bahubali Ghora* (1169 CE), *Saptakṣetrī* (1271 CE), and *Vasantavilasa* (14th century) are prime examples. These texts showcase the language's phonology, morphology, and syntax extensively.
 - **Emergence in Inscriptions:** While early hints exist (like Veraval), it's from the 12th century onwards that a growing number of inscriptions in Gujarat and Rajasthan show clearer and more extensive use of the vernacular, often in a mix with Sanskrit.

4. **Divergence into Old Gujarati and Old Rajasthani (c. 15th-16th Century CE onwards):** This period marks the beginning of distinct linguistic identities for Gujarati and Rajasthani.

- **Gujarati:** Developed specific vowel changes (e.g., loss of final -a), certain grammatical forms, and a distinct vocabulary influenced by its maritime trade and urban centers. Early literary works like *Kanhadade Prabandh* (1456 CE) by Padmanabha are key.
- **Rajasthani:** Retained more archaic features, particularly in its phonology and morphology. It developed its own distinct literary traditions, primarily through heroic ballads and devotional poetry. Meera Bai's poetry (16th century) is a prominent example.

Script Evolution: Brahmi to Nagari (for Gujarati-Rajasthani)

The script used for writing Gujarati and Rajasthani evolved from the common Brahmi ancestor through the following stages:

1. **Gupta Brahmi (c. 4th-6th Century CE):** The direct ancestor of later Nagari scripts across North and Western India.
2. **Siddhamātrikā Script (c. 7th-9th Century CE):** This script evolved from Gupta Brahmi, characterized by its more angular forms and a clear transition towards the individual characters of Nagari. Inscriptions of the Maitrakas of Valabhi (Gujarat) and early Gurjara-Pratihara rulers (Rajasthan) primarily used this script.
3. **Early Nagari Script (c. 10th-12th Century CE):** By the 10th century, the Nagari script, with its characteristic horizontal head-stroke (*shirorekhā*) and more uniform letter shapes, became prevalent across North and Western India. The Veraval inscription is written in a form of this early Nagari. This script was shared by Sanskrit and the evolving vernaculars.
4. **Proto-Gujarati/Rajasthani Scripts (c. 13th-16th Century CE):** Within the broad Nagari framework, subtle stylistic differences began to emerge in Gujarat and Rajasthan.
 - **Gujarati Script:** Eventually developed without the continuous horizontal head-stroke, instead using individual head marks for each character. This made it

distinct from Devanagari. It became fully standardized from the 17th century onwards.

- **Rajasthani Script:** Largely retained the continuous head-stroke and continued to evolve within the Nagari tradition, sharing many features with the Devanagari script used for Hindi. Marwari and Mahajani (a mercantile variant) scripts also developed.

Content and Societal Insights from Early Gujarati-Rajasthani Inscriptions

The inscriptions, even when predominantly Sanskrit, offer valuable insights into the societies of ancient Gujarat and Rajasthan:

1. **Royal Patronage and Dynastic History:** These inscriptions are vital for reconstructing the history of powerful dynasties like the Chaulukyas (Solankis) of Gujarat, the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Chauhans, and Paramaras of Rajasthan. They detail their genealogies, military campaigns, and administrative policies, providing a chronological framework.
2. **Agrarian Economy and Land Tenure:** Land grants constitute a significant portion of these records. They provide detailed information on land ownership, types of land, agricultural practices, and revenue systems, highlighting the agrarian nature of the economy.
3. **Trade and Urban Centers:** Gujarat, particularly its coastal regions (like Veraval), was a major hub for maritime trade. Inscriptions sometimes refer to trade routes, mercantile guilds (e.g., *mahājana*), and urban centers, indicating the economic vitality of the region.
4. **Religious Landscape:** Inscriptions reflect the diverse religious practices and patronage. They document grants to various Hindu deities (Vishnu, Shiva, Surya), Jain temples and monasteries, and sometimes even Buddhist institutions. This highlights the religious pluralism and the importance of religious establishments as economic and social centers.
5. **Social Structures:** The inscriptions often mention various social groups, castes, and officials, providing glimpses into the social hierarchy and professional specializations of the time.

6. **Linguistic Diffusion:** The gradual appearance of vernacular elements within Sanskrit inscriptions provides direct evidence of the linguistic transition and the increasing influence of the common people's language on formal records.

Challenges in Studying Early Gujarati-Rajasthani Epigraphy

1. **Lack of Pure Vernacular Texts:** The biggest challenge is the scarcity of extensive, purely Old Gujarati/Rajasthani inscriptions from the early period. Unlike some Dravidian languages, the vernacular makes a slower, more subtle appearance in formal epigraphy.
2. **Sanskrit Dominance:** The overwhelming use of Sanskrit in royal and religious inscriptions for a long time means that linguistic analysis must focus on identifying the subtle vernacular substrate within Sanskrit texts, or on later bilingual records.
3. **Gradual Linguistic Divergence:** The common ancestry of Gujarati and Rajasthani (OWR) makes it difficult to pinpoint the exact moment of their linguistic separation in inscriptions. The divergence was gradual and regional variations are often subtle.
4. **Paleographical Homogeneity:** The early Nagari script was relatively uniform across North and Western India. Distinguishing early Gujarati-Rajasthani inscriptions relies more on linguistic content and historical context than on unique script features.
5. **Fragmentary and Damaged Records:** Many ancient inscriptions are fragmentary, weathered, or damaged, making complete decipherment and interpretation challenging.

Despite these challenges, the rigorous work of scholars specializing in Indo-Aryan linguistics and epigraphy (such as George Abraham Grierson, L. P. Tessitori, A. M. Ghatage, Bhogilal Sandesara, M. C. Modi, etc.) has been instrumental in reconstructing the early history of Gujarati and Rajasthani.

Conclusion

The study of **Early Gujarati-Rajasthani** inscriptions, though differing in nature from those of other regions due to the prolonged dominance of Sanskrit, is fundamental to understanding **Western India's Linguistic Evolution**. While purely vernacular texts are rare in the earliest phases, important insights are gleaned from **Jaina literary manuscripts** in Old Western Rajasthani and, crucially, from **regional inscriptions** like the **Veraval Inscription of Chaulukya King Bhima I (c. 1026 CE)**. These epigraphs, though predominantly in Sanskrit,

offer invaluable glimpses into the nascent forms of Old Gujarati and Old Rajasthani through the increasing presence of local place names, technical terms, and subtle phonetic or grammatical traits.

The Veraval inscription, a significant royal land grant, exemplifies how a formal Sanskrit record can still betray the underlying linguistic dynamism of the region. It points to a period when the common Gurjar Apabhramsha was solidifying into a distinct Old Gujarati-Rajasthani, laying the groundwork for the later independent development of Gujarati and Rajasthani. These inscriptional records, alongside literary evidence, are indispensable primary sources for historical linguists, enabling them to trace the evolution of these Indo-Aryan languages from their common roots. They provide not just linguistic data but also crucial information on the political history, agrarian economy, trade networks, and religious patronage of Western India during the early medieval period, thereby illuminating the rich and complex tapestry of its linguistic and cultural heritage.

Chapter V

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Indian Epigraphy

Our journey through the **earliest linguistic records of India** has traversed millennia, from the enigmatic symbols of the Indus Valley Civilization to the crystallizing forms of classical and regional languages. We began with the foundational **Brahmi script**, the mother of nearly all modern Indic scripts, and its early expressions in **Prakrit**, notably the ubiquitous edicts of Emperor Ashoka. This early phase revealed a pan-Indian linguistic substrate, a common tongue that bound diverse regions under imperial sway. As the subcontinent evolved, so did its linguistic landscape. We witnessed the stately emergence of **Classical Sanskrit** in stone, exemplified by Rudradaman's Junagadh inscription, marking a pivotal shift in royal patronage and scholarly prestige. Concurrently, the Dravidian south forged its own path, with **Early Tamil** asserting its ancient literary heritage in Tamil-Brahmi, followed by **Early Kannada** and **Early Telugu** developing distinct identities and scripts from their common Dravidian roots. The eastern and western fringes of the subcontinent too embarked on their unique linguistic journeys, with **Early Bengali-Assamese** and **Early Odia** emerging from the Magadhan Prakrit lineage, and **Early Gujarati-Rajasthani** and **Early Marathi** differentiating from the Apabhramsha dialects of Western India. Each language, in its own time and in its own distinctive script, etched its presence onto the historical record.

The Indispensable Role of Epigraphy

This detailed exploration unequivocally emphasizes the **indispensable role of epigraphy in constructing the linguistic, historical, and cultural narrative of India**. In a civilization where perishable manuscripts often succumbed to time and climate, inscriptions carved on durable stone, metal, and pottery stand as the **most reliable and often the only direct primary sources** for understanding the past.

Linguistically, epigraphy provides concrete, dated evidence of language evolution. It allows scholars to:

- **Trace phonetic shifts and morphological changes** from Old Indo-Aryan and Proto-Dravidian stages to the nascent forms of modern vernaculars.
- **Reconstruct archaic vocabulary and grammatical structures**, offering glimpses into linguistic forms that often predate extant literary works.

- **Pinpoint the periods of divergence** for various languages from their common ancestors, such as the separation of Kannada and Telugu, or the distinction between Odia, Bengali, and Assamese.
- **Understand the interplay between languages**, observing how Sanskrit, Prakrit, and regional vernaculars co-existed, influenced each other, and gradually asserted their distinct identities in official records. The bilingual or multilingual nature of many inscriptions is a testament to this dynamic linguistic environment.
- **Decipher the evolution of scripts**, charting the transformation of Brahmi into its myriad regional derivatives, each telling a story of distinct paleographical development that often precedes and runs parallel to linguistic diversification.

Historically, inscriptions are the bedrock of Indian chronology and political history. They:

- **Provide regnal years and dynastic genealogies**, allowing historians to establish reliable timelines for numerous kingdoms and empires, from the Mauryas and Satavahanas to the Pallavas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Cheras, Cholas, and various regional dynasties.
- **Document military campaigns, conquests, and territorial expansions**, offering direct accounts of inter-state relations and political power struggles.
- **Illuminate administrative structures and practices**, detailing the roles of officials, land tenure systems, revenue collection methods, and legal codes.
- **Record social customs, economic transactions, and religious endowments**, thereby painting a vivid picture of daily life, societal hierarchies, trade networks, and patronage systems. Without these records, large swathes of India's ancient and early medieval history would remain shrouded in conjecture.

Culturally, epigraphy acts as a mirror reflecting the evolving beliefs, values, and artistic expressions of Indian civilization. It reveals:

- **Religious affiliations and patronage**, documenting the rise and fall of various sects (Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism), the construction of temples and monasteries, and the devotion of rulers and commoners.
- **The spread of ideas and cultural norms**, often through the very act of inscribing religious tenets or royal virtues.

- **Artistic and architectural traditions**, as many inscriptions are intrinsically linked to monumental structures, providing context for their creation and purpose.
- **Evidence of religious pluralism and cultural exchange**, particularly highlighted by grants to diverse communities like Jews and Syrian Christians in Kerala, or the presence of multilingual inscriptions reflecting cosmopolitan societies.

Outlook on Future Discoveries and Research

Despite centuries of dedicated work by epigraphists, archaeologists, and linguists, the field of Indian epigraphy remains vibrant and holds immense promise for future discoveries and research.

- **New Discoveries:** India's vast archaeological landscape continues to yield new inscriptions. Each new find, however small or fragmented, has the potential to refine existing chronologies, shed light on unknown rulers or dynasties, or provide crucial linguistic data that challenges established theories. Ongoing excavations and chance discoveries by local communities often bring new records to light.
- **Technological Advancements:** Digital imaging, 3D scanning, and advanced computational linguistics are revolutionizing the study of epigraphy. These technologies can:
 - **Improve readability** of faded or damaged inscriptions, making previously illegible texts accessible.
 - **Facilitate comparative analysis** of scripts and linguistic features across a vast corpus, leading to more nuanced understandings of evolution and relationships.
 - **Create accessible digital archives**, making these invaluable primary sources available to a global community of scholars and the public.
- **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Future research will increasingly benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration. Combining epigraphical analysis with archaeological stratigraphy, numismatics, art history, and even environmental studies can yield a more holistic understanding of ancient Indian societies. For instance, linking inscription data on agricultural practices with paleobotanical evidence.
- **Re-evaluation of Existing Records:** Even well-known inscriptions are subject to re-interpretation as linguistic theories evolve, new historical contexts emerge, or

comparative data from other regions becomes available. Scholars continue to debate the nuances of dating, linguistic classification, and historical implications of key inscriptions.

- **Focus on Understudied Regions and Languages:** While much focus has been on major empires, future research may increasingly concentrate on less-studied regional inscriptions or minority languages, uncovering a richer tapestry of local histories and linguistic diversity.

In conclusion, the journey through India's earliest linguistic records, etched in stone and metal, is a testament to the enduring power of written communication. These inscriptions are not mere historical artifacts; they are the living voices of ancient India, recounting its sagas, codifying its laws, expressing its faiths, and charting the very birth and evolution of its diverse languages. The **enduring legacy of Indian epigraphy** lies in its irreplaceable contribution to our understanding of this multifaceted civilization, offering a continuous narrative that bridges the past with the present and promises further revelations for generations of scholars to come. What future secrets do India's unyielding stones still hold?

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ISBN: 978-93-343-5561-1



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