

## CHAPTER – 40

# BRAHMI SCRIPT IN THE TAMIL

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### **Introduction**

The origins of the Brahmi in general and Tamil-Brahmi specifically are unclear. There are number of inscriptions whose dates have not been settled yet. Nevertheless a number of theories has been put forward with literary, epigraphic and archeological evidence. The received consensus is a 3rd-century “post-Ashokan” dispersal, but that since the year 2000, there has been two serious candidates for a pre-Ashokan date (1).

### **Brahmi in Tamil Literature**

The earliest mention of a script for writing the Tamil language is found in the Jainawork Samavayanga Sutta (300 BCE) and Pannavana Sutta (168 BCE) where a script called Damilli is mentioned. In the Buddhist work, Lalitavistara (translated into Chinese in 308 CE), a script called Dravidalipi is mentioned. According to Kamil Zvelebil, Damilli and Dravidalipi are synonymous for Tamil writing. References to writing are also available in early Tamil literature(2). Tolkappiyam in stanza 16 and 17 mentions dots added to consonants. The author of Tolkappiyam displays awareness of a writing system and the graphic system as he knew it corresponds with later writing systems. Other works such as Tirukkural mentions writing using the word ezhuttu Cilappatikaram mentions kannezhuttu that was used to mark merchandise imported at the port emporium of Kaveripattinam, it also mention skannezhuttalar or scribes.(3) A reference to palm leaf manuscript writing is found in Nalatiyar and Purananuru mentions ahero stone that has the name of the hero etched in it.

Based on the literature analysis, Kamil Zvelebil believes writing was known to Tamil people at least from the 3rd century BC.(4) Brahmi in Epigraphic evidence for pre-Ashokan dispersal comes from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. The earliest attested Brahmi inscriptions in South Asia are found in the citadel of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka and are dated to the 4th century BCE. According to Allchin et al., Brahmi developed before the southern spread of Ashokan missionary activities and spread across South Asia due to trade networks. There have been a few inscriptions found in Tamil Nadu that have been tentatively dated to 5th century BCE in Porunthal. Based on epigraphic review, several hypotheses have been proposed, with

the theory suggested by epigraphist Iravatham Mahadevan having consensus. According to Mahadevan, Brahmi script reached the Tamil country due the southern spread of Jainism and Buddhism from North India, and was adapted to suit the Tamil phonetic system.(6) This theory presupposes that Brahmi script itself was either invented or originated within the imperial courts of Mauryan kingdom and it was dispersed to South India and Sri Lanka post 3rd century BCE. The time line of dispersal is either post Ashokan or early Mauryan period. Ahmed Hassan Dani questioned the 3rd BCE date and suggested 1st century CE as the probable date but this has been discounted by others such as T.V. Mahalingam and Richard Salmon.

A 2012 discovery of a 2nd-century BCE Tamil Brahmi inscription in Samanamalai (Jaina hill), Madurai district indicates widespread use in Tamil country post 3rd BCE period. (6) Brahmi in Inscriptions artifacts such as inscribed potsherds, coins or any other that are found in Tamil Nadu in successive Undisturbed cultural layers are dated based on stratigraphy. The layer on the top is considered younger than the layer that is found below. Thus, a succession of layers provides a relative chronological sequence from earliest to latest. The inscribed potsherds recovered from Kodumanal when analyzed on the basis of stratigraphical sequences are dated to 4th century BCE at the lowermost level. The lowermost level potsherd had the scripts peculiar to Tamil characters and in addition distinctive paleographic shape for letter m. Further, there is omission of voiced consonants, aspirates and sibilants peculiar to Tamil- Brahmi. This phenomenon is not confined to the Kodumanal in Kongu Nadu but found throughout the Tamil Nadu, Kerala and in Jaffna peninsula of Sri Lanka.

The evolution and uniform adoption of this peculiar script would have taken considerable time to spread widely. According to K. Rajan, the introduction or evolution or origin of script in Tamil Nadu might well be before the 4th century BCE due to the uniformity of the script, lack of grammatical errors and the widespread usage. Tamil-Brahmi had notable peculiarities when compared to the Standard Brahmi. It had four different characters to represent Dravidian language phonemes not represented in the standard northern-based Brahmi used to write Indo-Aryan Prakrits.(7) It was also the first Indic writing system that moved towards alphabetization. The attempt at alphabetization eventually failed due to strong influence from neighboring Indic abugida writing systems. The closest resemblance to Tamil-Brahmi is to its neighboring Sinhala-Brahmi. Both seem to use similar letters to indicate phonemes that are unique to Dravidian languages although Sinhala-Brahmi was used to write an Indo-Aryan Prakrit used in the island of Sri Lanka. Apart from Sinhala- Brahmi, there are Tamil-Brahmi writings found in Sri Lanka from Kantharodai in the north to Tissamaharama in the south which are dated to 2nd century BCE. The Bhattiprolu inscription found in present day Andhra Pradesh also shows systemic but not paleographic similarity to Tamil Brahmi.(8) According to Richard Salmon, the Bhattiprolu script was originally invented to write a Dravidian language but was reapplied to inscribe in an Indo-Aryan Prakrit. Hence both the Bhattiprolu and Tamil Brahmi share common modifications to represent Dravidian languages. Bhattiprolu script is also considered the Rosetta Stone of Tamil Brahmi decipherment.

According to Iravatham Mahathevan there are three stages in the development of the script. The early stage is dated from 3rd or 2nd century BCE to 1st century BCE. The later stage is dated from the 1st to 2nd century CE. The third stage is dated from the 2nd century CE to the 3rd or 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. According to Gift Siromony, the types of Tamil Brahmi writings do not follow a very clear chronology and can lead to confusion in dating. According to K. Rajan, the Ashokan Brahmi corresponds with the Stage II of Tamil Brahmi per Mahadevan's classification. Hence according to him, Stage I may have to be reassessed from the proposed time line. From the 5th century CE onwards Tamil is written in Vatteluttu in the Chera and Pandya country and Grantha or Tamil script in the Chola and Pallava country.

Tamil Brahmi inscriptions in cave beds and coins have provided historians with identifying some kings and chiefs mentioned in the Cankam Tamil corpus as well as related Ashokan pillar inscriptions.(9) Conclusion Tamil-Brahmi, or Damili, is a variant of the Brahmi script used to write the Tamil language. These are the earliest documents of a Dravidian language, and the script was well established in the Chera and Pandyan states, in what is now Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and northern Sri Lanka. Inscriptions have been found on cave beds, pot sherds, Jar burials, coins, seals, and rings. The language is Archaic Tamil, and lead to classical Sangam literature. Tamil Brahmi differs in several ways from Ashokan Brahmi. It adds several letters for sounds not found in Prakrit: Secondly, in many of the inscriptions the inherent vowel has been discarded: A consonant written without diacritics represents the consonant alone, whereas the Ashokan diacritic for long ā is used for both ā and short a in Tamil Brahmi. This is unique to Tamil Brahmi and Bhattiprolu among the early Indian scripts. This appears to be an adaptation to Dravidian phonotactics, where words commonly end in consonants, as opposed to Prakrit, where this never occurs. According to Mahadevan, in the earliest stages of the script the inherent vowel was either abandoned, as above, or the bare consonant was ambiguous as to whether it included a short a or not. Later stages of Tamil Brahmi returned to the inherent vowel that was the norm in India. (10)

## END NOTES

- 1 Mahadevan, Iravatham (2010-06-24). "An epigraphic perspective on the antiquity of Tamil". The Hindu(Chennai, India).
2. Ibid
- 3 Subrahmanian. p. 22. History of Tamilnadu
- 4 Sharma, TRS (2000). Ancient Indian Literature: An Anthology. Vol III. Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. p. 43.
- 5 "Sankam literature". The Encyclopædia Britannica 2. 2002. p. 802.

- 6 Rajam, V. S. 1992. A reference grammar of classical Tamil poetry: 150 B.C.-pre-fifth/sixth century A.D. Memoirs of the American philosophical society, v. 199. Philadelphia, Pa: American Philosophical Society. p12
- 7 Dr. M. Varadarajan, A History of Tamil Literature, (Translated from Tamil by E.Sa. Viswanathan), Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1988 p.40
- 8 Sastri. A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar. p. 127.
- 9 Subrahmanian. Sangam polity. p. 23.
- 10 Sastri. The Pandyan Kingdom. pp. 141–5, 21, 31.