Kharoṣṭī : A Script of Ancient India

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The antiquity or beginning of writing in India is difficult to ascertain, as no such evidences are available to us, which can pinpoint that the art of writing was invented in such and such period. The earliest evidences of writing available to us are the inscriptions of the Mauryan Emperor Aśoka (272-232 BCE), who made an innovation and got his messages inscribed on durable material like rocks, which remained preserved for our records. Some sort of script came to light from the Indus Valley sites, but it has not yet been convincingly deciphered. Some other available inscriptions are subjected to controversies, like the Piprahwa Vase Inscription, Mhāsthāna Inscription, Sohgaura Inscription, Bhaṭṭiprolu Inscription, Barli Inscription and Śaiśunika Image Inscriptions from Patna and Parkham (Mathura). Scholars have diverse opinions regarding their antiquity. Some think these are prior to Aśoka while others consider these to be of later period. But the antiquity and authenticity of the inscriptions of Aśoka are undisputable. This great emperor used four scripts, viz. Brāhmī, Kharoṣṭī, Greek and Aramaic, in his inscriptions for different regions of his vast empire where these could be read and understood by maximum number of people. While Greek and Aramaic were the foreign scripts, Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭi were the scripts of India. Though Brāhmī was known and used in greater part of India and survived much longer in comparison to Kharoṣṭī, yet latter was also an important script that helps us a lot to reconstruct our history.

Origin

The two theories of Indian and Foreign origins have been postulated regarding the origin of Kharoṣṭī script :

(i) **Indian Origin :** A group of scholars believe that Kharoṣṭī was an indigenous script just like Brāhmī, which originated in India and further developed and used in certain regions and perished after few centuries. According to them, not a single inscription in Kharoṣṭī has been recovered from West Asia, which is supposed to be the land of origin of this script. Moreover, the Iranian kings never used Kharoṣṭī, which is believed to have sprouted from Aramaic, in their administrative works. Notably, Kharoṣṭī contains features

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like *anusvāra*, ligatures and conjuncts, which were essential for writing Indian languages. This proves that this script was developed indigenously and made compatible to meet this basic requirement. Moreover, Aśoka used both the Aramaic and Kharoṣṭī scripts simultaneously in his inscriptions, which means that these were separate scripts and had no connection with each other. The Chinese Encyclopaedia *Fa-Wan-Shu-Lin* also records that Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭī originated in India and were invented by Bramhā and Kharoṣṭha, respectively. The northwest portion of India, where Kharoṣṭī was mainly used, was prone to foreign attacks and after Iranians, the Greeks, Scythians, Parthians and Kuṣāṇas also used this script. Being in touch with the invaders for a long time, the Indians gradually became indifferent to this script and stopped using it completely.[1]

(ii) **Foreign Origin :** Another group of scholars are of the view that Kharoṣṭī was developed from the Aramaic script. The arguments put forth in support of this theory are - (i) Kharoṣṭī is written from right to left like Aramaic; (ii) Kharoṣṭī came in use after the Iranian attack on India; (iii) Kharoṣṭī remained confined to those regions only which were under Iranian control from 6th century to 4th century BCE; (iv) Use of the Iranian term *dipi* (writing or document) by Aśoka in his Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi edicts; (v) Lot of similarities in Kharoṣṭī and Semitic scripts, like the absence of long vowels; (vi) Excessive use of Aramaic in West Asia and Egypt compelled Iranians to use it in their administrative work, which automatically resulted in the development of Kharoṣṭī out of it for use in the Indian provinces; and (vii) Similarities in Aramaic and Kharoṣṭī alphabets.[2] Most of the scholars now accept the foreign origin of Kharoṣṭī script, which appears to be more logical.

Nomenclature

The real name of the script, written from right to left, remained a debatable issue among the scholars for long. Some confusion persists even till date. When discovered, several names were assigned to Kharoṣṭī script, such as 'Indo-Bactrian', 'Kabulian', 'Arianian', 'Gandharan', 'Bactro-Pāli', 'Ariano-Pāli' and so on. Some interesting theories came forth regarding the nomenclature of this script, which are as follows :

Kharoṣṭhī : The name 'Kharoṣṭhī' is due to Bühler,[3] who found evidence for this name in the *Lalitavistara* (composed in about the 3rd century CE) and in the Chinese Encyclopaedia *Fa-Wan-Shu-Lin,* compiled in CE 668 by Tao-shi. But the meaning of the term is by no means certain. *Kharoṣṭhī,* in *Fa-Wan-Shu-Lin* is mentioned as an 'Ass-lip' *(Khara + Oṣṭha,* hence named *Kharoṣṭhī)* script. The text accredits the invention of this script to a man in India called Kharoṣṭha after whom the script was named.

Kyrosti : The scholars attempted, after acquiring the script's name from the Chinese sources, to look for a befitting Indian word corresponding to Chinese rendering, i.e. *Kia-lu-she-ti.* The real name of the script, according to Lacouperie,[4] is concealed in the word *Kyros,* the *Kuras* and *Kurush* of the cuneiform inscriptions, the *Khusrau* of the Persian history. Kyros (Cyrus), founder of the Achaemenian Empire in Persia, extended his empire up to northwest India, which lasted there from 558 to 530 BCE. Cyrus introduced a script for the purpose of administration. Since he was the inventor or introducer of the script, the script thus got its name after him and was called *Kyros(ti).* There is a great probability that in the name of Kharoṣṭī, running from right to left, as was that of the Persians, the name of its introducer Kyros is concealed. As a matter of fact, *Kyro(ti),* being a foreign term, was not easily adaptable to Sanskrit onomastics. But Indians, somehow or other, made it possible and fabulously connected it with 'Ass-lip' *(Khara + Oṣṭha)* to derive some meaning out of this word. The word reached China along with its Indian meaning as preserved in the Chinese Encyclopaedia *Fa-Wan-Shu-Lin* with its connotative exposition as 'Ass-lip' script *(Kharoṣṭhī).* But its real name should be *Kyrosti.*

Kharoṣṭrī : In the process of attempting to trace the real name of the script, another interesting theory was propounded by Sylvan Levi,[5] who assigned the name *Kharoṣṭrī* to the script. His idea was that the script got its name after the region Kashgar (also called Kharoṣṭra) where *Khara* (Ass) and *Uṣṭra* (Camel) were found in abundance. As their skin was used as the writing base in this region, the script came to be known as *Kharoṣṭrī.* This view of Levi was rejected by the scholars on the ground that no country like 'Kharoṣṭra' ever existed and according to Chinese records, the invention of this script was by a person and not by a country. Hence, the name of the script as *Kharoṣṭrī cannot be accepted.*

Kharaposta/Kharosta : Pruzyliski[6] came up with the idea that the name of the script was derived from the Iranian term *Kharaposta,* meaning 'skin of donkey'.

According to him, the word *Khara* is common in both Sanskrit and Iranian, but the Sanskrit term for *Pusta* or *Pustaka*, i.e. manuscript, is derived from the Iranian *Posta*, meaning 'skin'. Notably, *Pustaka* at first was 'a manuscript on skin', the use of which spread from Persia to northwest India, where donkeys were in abundance. Hence, the script written on their skin came to be known as *Kharoṣṭrī*. He also tried to correlate the Kṣatrapa prince Kharosta of Mathura Lion Capital with the *Yakṣa* Kharosta of *Mahāmayūrī* composed in the 4th century CE. The Indians were not familiar with the Iranian terms *Posta* or *Osta*, both meaning 'skin'; hence, they replaced it with commonly known *Oṣṭha* (lip) and the script acquired the name *Kharoṣṭhī*. The scholars, however, did not accept this view of Pruzyliski in later developments.

Kharoṭṭha : Adding to the list of theories, Lüdwig[7] proposed that *Kharoṭṭha* is the Indian derivation of the Aramaic term *Haruttha*, meaning 'engraving' or 'writing', and the word *Kharoṣtha* is a false Sanskrit transliteration of *Kharoṭṭha*. In this way, *Kharoṣṭhī* acquired its name from Aramaic *Haruttha*. But Lüdwig's view was subsequently rejected by the scholars as correlating *Haruttha* with *Kharoṭṭha* was considered to be farfetched.

Xsahra-uistra : H.W.Bailey[8] expressing his view on the problem, proposed that the name *Kharoṣṭhī* or older *Kharoṣṭrī* is likely to be the Prakrit form of the Iranian terms *Xsahra* (from older *Xsara*, i.e. 'dominin' or 'empire') and *Uistra* (from older *Pistra*, i.e. 'script' or 'writing'). It means that the Iranian *Xsahra* became *Khara* in Prakrit and *Uistra* became *Oṣtrī*. Thus, according to Bailey, the term *Kharoṣṭhī* or Kharoṣtri was originated from the ancient Iranian *Xsahra-uistra*, i.e. 'imperial script'. His view is significant if we take into account Bühler's opinion that it was originated from Aramaic as an 'official alphabet' for the 'use of clerks' employed in administration of the Achaemenian Empire in India (c. 600-400 BCE). Bailey, however, is not certain about the exact name of the script and prefers to accept *Kharoṣtrī*.

Kharostī : According to C.S.Upasak[9] the name of the script, being of foreign origin, was not only unintelligible to Sanskrit or Prakrit knowing *Pandits* of India, but it was also difficult to pronounce correctly. As a matter of fact, in the Chinese rendering of the *Lalitavistara*, the name of the script occurs as *Kia-lu-she-ti*, which is exactly what it was already current in India. Originally, the real name given in the *Lalitavistara* was *Kharostī* (not *Kharoṣṭhī* or *Kharoṣṭrī*) and the translator rendered it faithfully as possible in Chinese phonetics and wrote it as *Kia-lu-she-ti*, which obviously is close to its original name as given in the text rather than its fake

transposition *Kharosthī* as exposed in the *Fa-Wan-Shu-Lin,* by deriving its name from Sanskrit compound *Khara + Ostha* (ass + lip).

It is further informed that three editions of Kanjur (the Tibetan translation of the *Buddhavacana)* are available and all contain the *Lalitavistara.* The Tibetan rendering has been so precise, perfect and faithful that the same may be rendered back into Sanskrit, almost exactly as it originally was, with the help of Tibetan-Sanskrit lexicon. The Tibetan translators are so meticulous that they have rendered the Sanskrit compounds or even the proper names into Tibetan language exactly what it meant. It is also interesting to find that in case of those names, which carry no meaning according to Sanskrit etymology for being foreign or otherwise, have been given exactly the same as spelt in Sanskrit text and noted them down in Tibetan without making any alteration. In the tenth chapter of *Lalitavistara,* where the names of 64 scripts occur, the first script is translated into Tibetan as *Brāhmī,* but the next is left 'untranslated' and noted as *Kharostī.* All the present three editions of Kanjur (viz. Derge, Lhasa and Peking) were compared and the name of the second script in the list, after *Brāhmī,* is invariably given as *Kharostī.* Moreover, another Sanskrit text, the *Mahāvastu,* which is supposed to have been composed in about 4th century CE or even earlier, contains a list of 32 ancient scripts, where the name of the third script, after *Brāhmī* and *Puskarasārī,* is also given as *Kharostī.*

Kharosti : The earliest list of the name of ancient scripts is obtained from the Buddhist Sanskrit text *Lalitavistara,* which reveals the names of 64 scripts. The first is *Brāhmī* and the second is recorded as *Kharosti.* Rajendra Lal Mitra first edited this treatise in 1877 based on five manuscripts of Indian and Nepalese origin and found the name of the script as *Kharosti.* Lefmann also edited this text on the basis of the manuscripts present in Europe and has given the same name as *Kharosti.* A third edition of it has been published by Mithila Sanskrit Research Institute, Darbhanga and edited by P.L.Vaidya; and there too, the same name of the script is given, as in other two editions, *Kharosti.*[10] According to R.C.Sharma[11] the script was used in 'Imperial Service' - *Khara/Ksaharāta + Osti,* i.e. 'in service' or 'in use'. Therefore, the exact spelling of the script should be *Kharosti.* This is in accordance with the views of Bühler and Bailey that the script was developed for official and administrative purpose.

Thus, three spellings of the name of the script are current at present among the scholars, viz. *Khrosthī, Kharostī* and *Kharosti.* However, the term *Kharosti* seems

to be more persuasive, because it was not the script of common people, but of the Iranian administrative officials in service of the Empire. They wanted to make the Indian people understand what they wanted to convey. At the same time, they needed a script, which they themselves could understand. Hence, they got the inscriptions written in local language. i.e. Prakrit, in a script, created from their own, i.e. Aramaic, so that the communication gap between the two cultures could be filled-up.

Extent

Kharoṣṭī was a script basically used in the northwest regions of India. The core of this script is considered to have been the region of Gandhāra (modern eastern Afghanistan and northern Punjab). Two edicts of Aśoka inscribed in this script are obtained from Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra (now in Pakistan). Dharmarājikā *stūpa* in Taxila also yielded Kharoṣṭī inscriptions. Some stray finds are reported from Mathura, Bharhut, Ujjain, Patna, etc. as far as Sidhhapur, Brahmagiri and Jating Rameshwar in South India from where minor rock edicts of Aśoka are recovered in which merely a word *lipikareṇa* is inscribed in Kharoṣṭī script just after the name of the scribe Capaḍa written in Brāhmī. But these finds do not establish that Kharoṣṭī was in regular use in these Brāhmī dominant areas. A manuscript of *Dhammpada* written in Kharoṣṭī script and Prakrit language was obtained by a French traveller Dutreuil de Rhins in 1892 from Khotan in Chinese Turkestan.

Earlier, scholars held that the use of Kharoṣṭī script was confined only to northwest India, but later discoveries and researches extended its presence to far eastern regions also. According to B.N.Mukherjee[12] 'a variety of the script, now called 'Eastern Kharoṣṭī', was in use in lower west Bengal from c. 1st century BC to early 5th century AD. The area was then included in ancient Vanga. A mixed script, consisting of Kharoṣṭī and Brāhmī letters also evolved in this territory by c. early 1st century A.D. It was probably referred to as *vimiśrita-lipi* or mixed-script in the *Lalitavistara.* The records in Kharoṣṭī and Kharoṣṭī-Brāhmī, found on rocks, vessels, plaques and seal-matrices furnish new data for the political, economic, social, religious and cultural history of pre-Gupta Bengal and its connection with the northwest. Some inscriptions in Kharoṣṭī and Kharoṣṭī-Brāhmī (from c. 1st century BC to c. 3rd century AD) have been found in caves in the Nawada district of Bihar. Kharoṣṭī and Kharoṣṭī-Brāhmī inscriptions of the Kuṣāṇa age dealing with the fashioning and transportation of stone-slabs raised from the quarries in the Chunar area of U.P. form a unique class of epigraphs. Kharoṣṭī and Kharoṣṭī-Brāhmī inscriptions have also been discovered in

Thailand, South Vietnam and Bali (Indonesia). They indicate early Bengal's commercial and cultural contacts with Southeast Asia. The Eastern Kharoṣṭī inscriptions and the epigraphs in the Mixed script form a major source of knowledge of history of early eastern India and its relations with Southeast Asia'. In the light of above, we can presume that the use of Kharoṣṭī script roughly extended from Laddakh and Svat Valley in the North to Lower Karnataka in the South, which is not free from doubts; and from Afghanistan and Baluchistan in the West to Southest Asia in the East. The Chinese Turkestan has now also been accepted by scholars as the region of Kharoṣṭī script.

Time-span

The time-span for which Kharoṣṭī script survived in India was for about one thousand years, which can broadly be placed between 5th century BCE and 5th century CE. The earliest Kharoṣṭī letters are regarded to be those appearing on the Persian *sigloi* dated around 5th-4th century BCE. However, the earliest records of the script in India occur in the inscriptions of Aśoka (mid 3rd century BCE) recovered from Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra. The foreign invaders like the Greeks, Scythians, Parthians and Kuṣāṇas, who firmly mark their presence in the history of ancient India, used this script liberally on their coins and inscriptions. Kharoṣṭī script under the royal patronage is noticed to have been used for the last time during the reign of later Kuṣāṇas (3rd-4th century CE). After that, a few private records may have been written in this script, but the rulers completely adopted the script of the masses, i.e. Brāhmī, for their official records even in the northwest territories of India where Kharoṣṭī was a well-known script. This script, however, reached Chinese Turkestan with the spread of Buddhism and survived there for a few centuries more; but no traces of Kharoṣṭī are seen in India during the appearance of the Huṇas in the 5th century CE.

Decipherment

The credit of decipherment of Kharoṣṭī script goes to the European scholars of Indological studies, like Prinsep, Lassen, Norris, Masson, Wilson, Cunningham and others. Discovery of the coins of Indo-Greek and Śaka rulers in the 18th-19th centuries with Greek and Prakrit inscriptions on them brought this script to light for the first time, followed by the edicts of Mauryan king Aśoka bearing this script. It was Masson who first predicated that the unknown script on the reverse of coins reveals the same names and titles of kings as given on the obverse in Greek. He conveyed his idea to Prinsep, who identified several letters of the script and established that the same names

and titles have been repeated on other side of the coins in a different script. The results, which the identifications of the royal names and titles on the coins seemed to furnish, were partly confirmed, partly rectified and enlarged, by the discovery of the Shahbazgarhi version of the Aśoka edicts and E.C. Bayley's Kangra inscription in Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭī. The characters of the Aśoka edicts are readable with full certainty, with the exception of a few ligatures. Similarly, the inscriptions of the Śakas offer no difficulties, and the new manuscript of the *Dhammapada* from Khotan is in general not difficult to read. But considerable portions of the inscriptions of the Parthian Guduphara and of the Kuṣāṇa kings Kaniṣka and Huviṣka, still resist the attempt of decipherers and interpreters.[13]

Language

The language of the inscriptions written in Kharoṣṭī script is invariably Prakrit. An inscription on a plate containing four *ślokas* (verses), recovered from Niya in Chinese Turkestan is the solitary example available till date in which Sanskrit is written in Kharoṣṭī script.[14] This shows that Kharoṣṭī script was probably not regarded to be feasible for writing Sanskrit in ancient India.

Material

The documents written in Kharoṣṭī script are preserved on the materials like stone, metal plates and vases, coins, cameos, birch-bark, leaf or birch tree *(bhūrja-patra)*, wood, leather and paper. The *Dhammapada* obtained from Khotan is the earliest manuscript written on *bhūrja-patra* available till date, and notably, it is in Kharoṣṭī. Aurel Stein is credited with the discovery of wood, leather and paper documents written in Kharoṣṭī script from Chinese Turkestan. All these documents are recorded in Prakrit language, except one being in Sanskrit.

Characteristics

In spite of surviving for about one thousand years in India, the Kharoṣṭī script maintained its forms and features throughout and hardly show any sign of development. Whatever variations we notice in the script, are due to the writing base and individual hands of the scribe or engraver. Some additions were, of course, made later to cater to the needs of phonetic expressions of a language. The invention of the diacritic strokes for new sounds is most important in Kharoṣṭī. As this script has been used to express sounds needed in different languages, it was necessary to devise ways by which a given alphabet might be adopted to the particular need. But despite these

additional strokes, the main forms of the nucleus letters hardly show any evolution. The Kharoṣṭī script has only one type, but it has complete power to express any sound of Sanskrit or foreign origin.[15]

The most discernible feature of Kharoṣṭī script is that it is written in right to left direction. The letters of the script follow the phonetic pronunciation, unlike Arabic or Roman. It was basically devised to write Prakrit, the language of the masses where long vowels were not required; hence the script was also initially devoid of these. The long vowels were introduced later, probably to make it suitable for writing Sanskrit. Another significant characteristic of Kharoṣṭī script is that all the vowels have only one basic form, i.e. 'a', and other vowels are created by adding underline and/or overline strokes to this basic form. When added to a consonant, the vowels are represented only with diacritic strokes attached to the body of the consonant itself. The *anusvāra* is denoted by placing a tiny 'ma' at the foot of the consonant.

Another interesting feature of the Kharoṣṭī script is that it shows affinity with both the Aramaic and the Brāhmī scripts. The forms of several Kharoṣṭī letters resemble with those of Aramaic, while the phonology follows the principles of Brāhmī where the rules of conjuncts and vocalized consonants are the same. Aramaic was suitable for Aramaic language, but it was not suitable for writing Prakrit, the language of people in general. Hence, Kharoṣṭī was created on the basis of Aramaic for the convenience of the Aramaic-knowing rulers. It was the necessity of grammar that brought it closer to Brāhmī and helped in the evolution of similar vowel notation and an equal number of consonants. The conjuncts are also formed in similar ways. But the main difference is seen in the vowels. While Brāhmī has three basic forms of vowels, 'a', 'i' and 'u', Kharoṣṭī has only one; the forms of the remaining vowels being obtained by the addition of diacritic strokes. In this respect, Kharoṣṭī is nearer to Aramaic; but while Aramaic does not need to express the medial vowels, Kharoṣṭī has to do it according to the needs of the grammar,[16] just like Brāhmī.

To conclude, Kharoṣṭī had a short span of life in India and its use was restricted to certain regions only and lesser number of documents was produced in this script in comparison to widely used Brāhmī script. However, its importance and vital role played in the history of ancient India cannot be ruled out. Unlike Brāhmī, a convention in the manner of writing developed in the limited area within which Kharoṣṭī script was used, which resulted in maintaining a unitary style and restricted its branching out into different schools. At present, quite a number of scholars can read, decipher

and interpret the documents written in Brāhmī script, but only few are left who can handle the documents written in Kharoṣṭī script. The reason is that Kharoṣṭī is considered to be very difficult and mind-boggling script. It is high time that more young researchers should come forward for furtherance of study in Kharoṣṭī script.

Notes and References

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Vowels				
a (अ) -	i (इ) -	u (उ) -	e (ए) -	o (ओ) -

Long Vowels				
ā (आ) -	ī (ई) -	ū (ऋ) -	ai (ऐ) -	au (औ) -

Anusvāra – aṁ (अं) -	*Visarga* – aḥ (अः) -

Consonants				
ka (क) -	kha (ख) -	ga (ग) -	gha (घ) -	–
ca (च) -	cha (छ) -	ja (ज) -	jha (झ) -	ña (ञ) -
ṭa (ट) -	ṭha (ठ) -	ḍa (ड) -	ḍha (ढ) -	ṇa (ण) -
ta (त) -	tha (थ) -	da (द) -	dha (ध) -	na (न) -
pa (प) -	pha (फ) -	ba (ब) -	bha (म) -	ma (म) -
ya (य) -	ra (र) -	la (ल) -	va (व) -	śa (श) -
ṣa (ष) -	sa (स) -	ha (ह) -		

Method of adding diacritic strokes to a consonant				
ka (क) -	kā (का) -	ki (कि) -	kī (की) -	ku (कु) -
kū (कृ) -	ke (के) -	kai (कै) -	ko (को) -	kau (कौ) -

Method of making conjuncts				
tma (त्म) -	ṣka (ष्क) -	tśa (त्श) -	tra (त्र) -	kraṁ (क्रं) -