

The Evolution of Oriya Alphabet

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The present State Orissa lies along the east coast in north latitude $17^{\circ} 49'$ and $22^{\circ} 34'$ and east longitude $81^{\circ} 23'$ and $87^{\circ} 29'$. It is comparatively rich in epigraphic materials for the study of the evolution of Oriya alphabet. The Oriya script, is traceable to the earliest decipherable alphabet of India, called Brahmi¹ of 3rd century B.C. found at Dhauli² on the southern bank of the river Daya near Bhubaneswar and the other at Jaugada³ on the bank of the river Rishikulya in Ganjam district. The Asokan Brahmi found in these two places present a general similarity all over India. Each letter is distinctly formed and no cursive writing in the way of continuously drawn outline is noticeable. The free movement of hand resulting the round forms and the letters are not having any serif on the top. The Asokan Brahmi alphabet is the mother of modern Oriya alphabet like the other regional alphabets of present India. On the basis of technical achievement and introduction of new writing tool, the archaic form optionally met with in the Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela of 1st century B.C. Due to the use of a broad or edged pen, the letters used in the minor rock inscriptions of 1st century B.C. at Udayagiri hill became more angularised. The introduction of 'tha' became almost same as used in the present time,

which has no link with any other period in the process of development of other letters. The great changes came due to the introduction of new writing tool of broad and edged pen which begin with a thick top and gradually thin downward stroke. The vertical by their tapering thickness received a new shape which looks like the addition of a thick triangular head mark on the top. Such influence is marked in the Bhadrak stone inscription of about the 3rd - 4th centuries A.D. The growing influence of the stylus in south India in the 5th - 6th centuries A.D. resulted the letters to become more rounded and have waves in their forms. The archaic and box - headed forms though developed in the southern and western Orissan inscriptions from 5th to 7th century A.D. but they have less importance to show the evolution of Oriya letters. However the letters in the Sirpur stone inscription of the time of Balarjuna of the 7th century A.D. present north Orissan letters and have some link for the growth of Oriya alphabet. The palaeography of the inscriptions of the Dattas, Vighrahas, Sambhuyasas and Naga families of north and central parts of Orissa from 5 to 7th centuries A.D. are greatly marked for the development of Oriya letters. In the Sumandala copper plate grant of Prithvi

vigraha Bhattaraka of 5th - 6th century AD., the letters like ga, ta, tha, ya, la and ha became more developed and the letters like ga, tha, and sa clearly suggest the origin of Oriya letters in the 5th-6th centuries A.D. From the last quarter of the 6th century A.D., another tendency is marked in the Sailodbhava records of northern Orissa of about the 7th Century A.D. The letters are sloped from the right to the left and show acute angle at the lower ends. From the first half of the 8th century A.D. to the middle of the 11th century A.D., the Bhaumakaras followed the characters of the Sailodbhava formulas but the scripts are generally taken to be of the eastern variety of the north Indian alphabet. Their letters became helpful for the development of Proto-Nagari and Nagari characters used by the Somavamsis of north and central parts of Orissa of 11th - 12th centuries A.D. The scripts of the Somavamsis bear a close resemblance to their modern Nagari counterparts. The earliest extant records of the family such as the Vakratentali plates of Mahabhavagupta I Janmejaya shows fully developed beautifully drawn top line covering the entire upper portion of the letters. The changes of the top horizontal line to triangular headmark is found carried to its logical conclusion of the records of Mahasivagupta-I. The usual feature of the triangular head mark played a crucial role for the development of a number of Oriya letters. In the Bhubaneswar inscription of Chodagangadeva of the 12th century A.D, the right part of the top triangle became open as seen in the letters of ka, cha, ja, ta, da, dha, na, ta, da, dha, na, bha, ma, ya, la, va, and ha. This feature is also seen in the Puri inscription of Anangabhima III of 13th century AD. The opening triangular head mark became

roundish both on the top and at the bottom in the later records of Orissan inscriptions and then took the Proto-Oriya and Oriya forms in the Gajapati records of the 15th - 16th centuries A.D. Though the Nagari alphabet predominated in the records of the Imperial Gangas but in some instances the Proto-Oriya forms are developed. The early Oriya characters are best represented in the Siddheswar temple inscription of Ganga king Narasimha IV. The vertical line became longer and shoots up as parallel to the top part of the letter as seen in the Bhubaneswar bilingual stone inscription which shows the Proto-Oriya form as under developed out from that variety. This has been represented in the letters such as ga, gha, na, pa, pha, ma, ya, sa and sha. The Proto-Oriya and Oriya characters were also in the process of assuming their present form in the Bhanja records of the 12th - 13th centuries AD. This is evidenced from the forms ta, tha, pa, pha, sha, and distinctly look like the modern Oriya characters as particularly seen in the Adipur copper plate grant of Durjayabhanjadeva. In the Antirigam plates of Yasabhanjadeva the letters are more modern than the other and more prominently of the Oriya style of writing. The later development is marked in the records of the Suryavamsi Gajapatis of the 15th - 16th centuries AD. Then the Oriya letters influenced both by the Nagari and southern characters as well as Proto-Bengali letters. As the palm leaf were the only writing materials in ancient Orissa as in the other parts of the sea-coast provinces of southern India, an iron stylus was employed for scratching the letters and this gave rise to the rounded shape of the Oriya characters.

References :

1. The earliest Indian script running from the left to the right is known as Brahmi script.
2. CII. Vol. I, pp. 84 - 97 ff and plates.
3. Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 101- 115 ff and plates.
4. The Mauryan Brahmi has been found in the Asokan rock and pillar edicts. The script used in the Asokan inscriptions is called Asokan Brahmi alphabet.
5. EI, Vol. XX, pp. 77 - 97 ff and plates.
6. EI, Vol. XXIX, p. 169 f and plate.
7. It is called box headed because the top of the letter give the appearance of small square boxes which are formed by linking of four strokes in the form of a square.
8. EI, Vol. XXXI, pp. 197-98 f f. and plates.
9. EI, Vol. XXVIII. pp. 79 - 85 ff. and plates.
10. It is used in the 10th and 11th centuries A.D. Orissan inscriptions. It is clearly marked by the covering of a horizontal bar on the top of the letters.
11. EI., Vol. XI, pp. 93 - 95 ff and plates.
12. EI, Vol. XXX, pp. 31 -32 ff and plates.
13. Ibid. pp. 197 203 ff and plates.
14. In Orissa the Proto - Oriya is represented by the charters of the later kings of the Somavamsis, Bhanjas and imperial Gangas. It has gradually transformed into modern Oriya alphabet.
15. EI., Vol. XXIX, pp. 105-08 ff and plates.
16. EI., Vol. XXXII, part - V. pp. 229-38 ff and plates.
17. EI, Vol XXV, pp 172-73 f and plates.
18. EI., Vol. XVIII, pp. 298 --99 ff and plates.

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