Brahmi, the Fountainhead
Mother of scripts of all native Indian languages
SINCE THE turf is our own land, we are dealing with a living tradition. In fact, many of the inscriptions cited can be seen ‘alive’ or in the museums, in India and, more likely, abroad. This is more so with Tamil inscriptions. Hence I have made it elaborate.

I have even attempted tutorial-like explanation, that can whet the appetite of the curious minded. A leisurely going through could be rewarding, and can even find holes in my arguments! But, my being not quite knowledgeable, has some virtue; none of the subject-matter in the presentation is mine, and were taken for authoritative sources.
As for as the Brahmi descendants are concerned, we may consider three lines of successions: the northern, which gave rise to Devanagari and the scripts for all the Indo-Germanic languages of India, scripts of the south and the pan-Indian scripts.

This part of the presentation mainly deals with the development of Devanagari and touches upon the scripts of the Southeast, while the next part would deal with scripts of the Tamil country, and that of its Dravidian siblings.
The discussion starts with the role of writing medium on the shape of letters. When writing went beyond royal proclamations, alternate media chosen were palm-leaf, in the coastal areas and bhoj patra, bark of a tree, elsewhere. The corresponding tools were iron-nail for the former and reed-pen with ink. This greatly affected the shape of letters, as can be seen in the presentation.

Specimens from significant periods have been chosen for discussion. The selections have been chronologically arranged, and I have tried add features that would make the presentation interesting, and, wherever possible teasing.
Development of Indian scripts

Scripts for all languages native to India originated in Brahmi, which had a number of regional variations, like Southern Brahmi, Tamil-Brahmi, Sinhala Brahmi etc.
Effect of writing materials

Over a period of time changes happened in the shape of Brahmi letters, the main reason being the use of various writing materials: the base on which the writing is caused and the writing tools.
From the period of Asoka we have inscriptions on stone using metal chisels. Straight lines were easier. Brahmi script consisted predominantly of short straight strokes.
Till a few centuries ago, we used a metal needle to engrave on palm leaves.

In this, rounded letters were preferable, as straight strokes may tear the leaf, particularly, along the length.
In the regions, where palm-leaf was the predominant writing medium, the script was rounded, like of all southern languages and of Orissa.
In North India, it was a pen on tree-bark, called, bhoja-patra, using a reed pen.
Devanagari and the north Indian scripts didn’t have to avoid straight lines, particularly the top line.
Development of latter 'क' (क) in Devanagari, Tamil and other south Indian Scripts

BCE-CE

TIME SCALE

2-3  3-4  5-6  6-7  7-8  9-10  11-12  13-14  15  15-20

Centuries BC→
Development of the letter ‘N’ (న్న) in all Indian languages starting from Brahmi,

It may be noted how the characters change drastically over the centuries!
Here is a sample Table from the Brahmi-based Indian scripts
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>শিবো রক্তং গীর্যাণ্যাভাসারসাস্সাধাতপারেন</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devanāgarī</td>
<td>शिवो रक्तं गीर्याण्याभासारसास्साधातपारेन</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarāti</td>
<td>શિભો રક્ત ગીરભાસાર્સારંશાહતપારન</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gurmukhī</td>
<td>ਸੰਘੇ ਰਕਮ ਗੀਰਭਾਸ਼ਾਰਸਾਰਸਕਾਰਾਦਰੋਧਿ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriyā</td>
<td>ଶିବୋ ରକ୍ତମ୬ ଗିରାଣ୍ଯାଭାସାରସାଧାଁଁତପରନ୍ଦ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>சிவோ ரக்தம் கிரிணவாசாரசாஸ்காத்த்துய த்தான்</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tēlugu</td>
<td>శివో రక్తం గీరభాసార్సారంశాధాత్తపరం</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kannada</td>
<td>ಶೇವಾ ರಕ್ತದೇಶದೇಶದಾಧಾಯತತ್ತು</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malayālam</td>
<td>ശിവാ രക്തമം ഗീരഭാസാരശാസ്ത്രാദേശത്താന്</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grantha</td>
<td>जीविता रक्तचः गीरभासारसार्श्चाद्यादत्तपारः</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>ศิวอรักษาภิพัสสสัสดิภัณฑ์คุณ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jawa</td>
<td>स्निग्धा जनमधः श्रुताधरकार्यमयामत्र्यतां</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bali</td>
<td>විශේෂය සහාරය ස්විප්‍රධාන මුදුන්භයනයාං</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinhala</td>
<td>විශේෂය වේදනයේ ස්විප්‍රධානයේ මුදුන්භයනයාං</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘The unity in diversity’
Brahmi changed over the period giving rise to the later Indian scripts.

We shall see in this direction Development of Devanagari through some examples
Bhattiprolu Brahmi, 3rd-2nd century BC

Some caskets found in a stupa in Bhattiprolu in the Krishna valley, contained Brahmi inscriptions. The script was close to Asokan Brahmi, but there were differences.

Called Southern variety of Brahmi, this was the only sample.

This freak sample was a cause of confusion to the experts who were deciphering Brahmi.
Bhattiprolu Brahmi

On the lid

नेगमा
बषो चन्द्रो
जो जमो तिसे
रैतो अचिनो शरीको
अखवो केलो केलो माही
सेटा छादिको अखबुलो
सोणुत्रो सम्गो
सम्पदाणो सामेको
कामुको चीतको

Around the lid

अरहदिनां खोठिया मजूस च बखुगो
च तेन कम थेन कुबिररो राजा अकि
Bhattiprolu Brahmi

Let us follow the meaning:

On the lid –
Members of the guild - Vacha (Vatsa), Chagha, Jeta (Jayanta), Jambha, Tisa (Tisya), Reta, Achina, Sabhika, Akhasghha (Aksanghna), Kela, Kesa, MAha, SeTa, Chhadika (Chhandika), OkhabUlA, SoNuttara (ShoNottara), Samana (ShramaNa), SamaNadAsa )ShramaNadAsa), SAMaka (ShyAmaka), KAmuka, Chitaka.

On the rim:
A casket and box are given by the Council of followers of the Arhadadina (Arhadatta). The work is executed by him whom the king Kubiraka got to prepare the carving.
There are a number of inscriptions found in Mathura.

Here is a headless statue of Kanishka, the Great and inscription can be seen on the lower part of his tunic.
Kushana Brahmi, Sanskrit, 2nd century CE

Nasik inscription of King Uasavadatta

This script is very similar to those found in Mathura. This is on among the finest in Indian epigraphy.
Kšatrapa Brahmi, Sanskrit, 2nd century CE

This is the earliest Sanskrit inscription

Junagadh inscription of King Rudradaman
This inscription is a fine example of classical Sanskrit. That the phrases used in this have been directly lifted from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata shows that the poet of this inscription was well-versed in these epics.

Let us transliterate one word of this inscription.
Junagadh inscription – a portion transliterated

Letters

Inscription

Transliterated
Greek & Kshatrapa Brahmi, Prakrit, 2nd century CE

We have also some bi-lingual coins of Rudradaman

Bust of Rudradaman, With Greek legend
Οvonιλoocvλclhλno.

Three-arched hill with river, crescent and sun.
Brahmi legend:
Rajno Ksatrapasa Jayadamasaputrasa
Rajno Mahaksatrapasa Rudradamasa
(King and Great Satrap Rudradaman, son of King and Satrap Jayadaman)
The Satavahana Nasik inscription of Queen Balasri

Satavahana Brahmi, Sanskrit, 3rd century CE

The Satavahana ruled a major part of the Deccan, And the later scripts of the Ikshvakus and the Pallavas were derived from the Satavahana script.
This inscription is an excellent literary piece. We find the qualities of the king extolled.

“whose command was accepted by the entire circle of kings,
“whose face was lovely and pure like the lotus opened by the rays of the sun, . . .,
“whose fearless hand was wet with the water poured out in assurance of protection, . . .,
“who well divided the place and time for the pursuit of the triple objects, that is, dharma, artha and kama,
“who equally rejoiced and sorrowed at the joys and sorrows of his citizens, . . .,
“who utilised taxes acquired righteously,
“who disliked hurting life even in the case of an enemy at fault, . . .”
Ikshvaku Brahmi, Prakrit-Sanskrit, 3rd century CE

Hirahatahalli inscription of Sivaskandavarman

Some letters acquired longer vertical lines and curves.
The last line is in Sanskrit.
During the Gupta period two styles developed
- monumental for inscription
- cursive for writing on palm-leaf, bhoj-patra and leather
Gupta Brahmi (Northern), Sanskrit, 4th century CE

The above inscription is an example of nail-headed letters characteristic of the Gupta.

Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta
Gupta Brahmi, Sanskrit, 4th century CE

Here is a gold coin of Samudragupta.

The King, standing holding *parashu* with a dwarf and a standard on the left.

Brahmi legend `*samudra*’ is below his arm.

Goddess Lakshmi on a throne, holding cornucopiae and a bouquet of flower on the left.

The Brahmi legend on the right reads `*krtantaparasuh*’
Gupta Brahmi, Sanskrit, 4th-5th century CE

Here is a gold coin of Chandragupta Vikramaditya

King, with a crest jewel on his fore head, is killing a lion with an arrow. The legend around reads

नरेन्द्रचन्द्र प्रथितरनो

jayatya jayyo bhuvi simhavikramah

Goddess Laxmi, seated on a lion, holds lotus in her left hand and noose in her right hand. The legend reads simhavikramah
Gupta Brahmi (Southern), Sanskrit, 4th century CE

The first line is nail-headed and the other two box-headed, both characteristic of the Gupta-s.
Gupta Brahmi in Bhoja-patra
Kadamba Brahmi, Sanskrit, 4th-5th century CE

This, of great charm and beauty, retains the box-headed features of the Guptas.

This is also the basis of the Old Kannada script.
Vakataka Brahmi, Sanskrit, 5th century CE

The Vakatakas follow the box-headed features of the Gupta who were related to the Vakataka-s. But later these features are not present.
Pallava Brahmi, Prakrit, 5th century CE

The Pallava-s continue the Gupta features,
But in the later Pallavas these are absent.
The change over from Brahmi to Devanagari and other scripts begins in the 6th century, with Yashodharman, the Gurjar King, who ruled the Malwa region.
From the Gupta Brahmi two forms branched off: 
  _ the cursive, eastern branch to form 
    Bengali-Assamese script, and 
  - the non-decorative, western style 
    to evolve into Sharada script
First let us follow the development of Nagari script, a branch of which, called Devanagari became to be the most important script for writing Sanskrit throughout India.

The final form of Devanagari was reached by the 15th century.
The name Nagari is from Nagara (Pataliputra).
The Nagari script was first developed in the Deccan in the 8\textsuperscript{th} century, then in the north in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century.
The former came to be known as Nandanagari, (after the place Nanded in the Deccan) and the northern variety as Devanagari (after a name of Chandragupta Vikramaditya)
Devanagari of Yashodharman
Sanskrit, 6th century CE

Here we see the beginning of settled and beautiful Nagari script.

Mandasor Inscription of Yashodharman
Now we can see the complete change into Nagari script. The beautiful script testifies to the taste of the emperor. The ‘acute-angle’ script is called *kutila*, and can be seen the Pallava inscriptions also.
King Harshvardhana was not only a mighty king, but also a man of literature, and also a calligrapher.

Here is a beautiful signature of the emperor.
The Pallava contribution
7th-8th century CE

This great temple-building clan has to its credit great strides in writing too.
They followed the Harshavardhana style of Devanagari, but also developed Grantha script to write Sanskrit in the Tamil country.
They have also contributed to the development of the Tamil script.
Devanagari during the Pallavas
Sanskrit, 7th century CE

Saluvakkupam Inscription of Rajasimha

The ‘acute-angle’ script, *kutila*, seen in the Harshavardhana inscription can be seen here also.
Rajasimha Pallava’s inscriptions in the Kailasanatha Temple in Kanchipuram are calligraphy at its best.

Using Devanagari and simple to floriated Grantha scripts, he inscribed hundreds of his titles in this temple.
In these, like the one below, the calligraphic rendering in addition to beautiful curves, there are suggestions of plumes and neck of peacocks.
Devanagari during the Western Chalukyas
Sanskrit, 8th century CE

Here the nail-headed character of the Guptas is retained.

This, along with the Pallava inscription in Saluvakkupam, are the earliest Devanagari script in the south.
Devanagari during the Rashtrakutas

Sanskrit, 10th century CE

Begumra Copperplate Inscription of Indraraja III

Here is an example of next stage of development of Nagari in the Deccan
Devanagari during the Sena Dynasty
Sanskrit, 12th century CE

The significant changes from the northern variety in the North-east can be seen here.
This ultimately led to the Bengali script.
Devanagari during the Vijayanagaras
Sanskrit, 15th century CE

Satyamangalam copper plate Inscription of Devaraja

Final shape of Devanagari was reached
during the reign of Krishnadevaraya