



International Journal of Sanskrit Research

अनन्ता

ISSN: 2394-7519

IJSR 2024; 10(6): 141-145

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www.anantaajournal.com

Received: 11-10-2024

Accepted: 15-11-2024

MS Tharshini

Department of EEE, Arunachala
College of Engineering for
Women, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu,
India

Dr. A Uma

Department of Mathematics,
Arunachala College of
Engineering for Women,
Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India

I Siriya Pushpa Leela

Associate Professor, Department
of Mathematics, Arunachala
College of Engineering for
Women, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu,
India

MK Anitha

Associate Professor, Department
of Mathematics, Arunachala
College of Engineering for
Women, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu,
India

Corresponding Author:

MS Tharshini

Department of EEE, Arunachala
College of Engineering for
Women, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu,
India

The ancient grantha script

MS Tharshini, A Uma, I Siriya Pushpa Leela and MK Anitha

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/10.22271/23947519.2024.v10.i6c.2530>

Abstract

Grantha script originated in South India from the Brahmi script and was primarily used for writing Sanskrit and Tamil texts. It played a significant role in Tamil literature and religious worship. This script emerged during the Pallava dynasty and was used extensively for writing inscriptions and manuals. Grantha script diverged from Brahmi to reflect certain unique Tamil words. The script is explained in detail with several examples.

Keyword: Devanagari, manipravalam, Pallava script

Introduction

Grantha is a writing system used in South India for writing Sanskrit. The script used in the Indian language Malayalam also originated from Grantha. Additionally, Grantha played an important role in the development of writing systems for South-East Asian languages, including Burmese, Tamil, and Sinhala.

Methodology

The Grantha script used by the Pallavas is called "Pallava Grantha," also referred to as Pallava script. It is from this Pallava Grantha script that the writing systems of South-East Asian languages evolved.

ക	വ	ഗ	ഖ	ജ
k	kh	g	gh	ñ
ച	ച	ജ	ഘ	ഞ
c	ch	j	jh	ñ
ട	ഠ	ഡ	ഢ	ണ
t	th	d	dh	n
പ	പ	ബ	ഭ	മ
p	ph	b	bh	m
യ	ര	ല	വ	ഃ
y	r	l	v	!
ശ	ഷ	സ	ഹ	
ś	ṣ	s	h	

Script type	Abugida
Time Period	6 th century BCE to the 16 th century CE
Direction	Left to right
Languages	Sanskrit, Manipravalam

Related Scripts

Root Scripts	Brahmi South Brahmi Pallava Grantha
Derived Scripts	Malayalam script, Tulu script
Related Forms	Circular Script

Grantha Script

In South India, especially in Tamil Nadu, the Grantha script was used to write Sanskrit. In modern times, the usage of Grantha has significantly declined with the rise of Devanagari script. In Tamil Nadu, the anti-Sanskrit movements that began a few years ago might have contributed to the reduced use of Sanskrit.

Origin and Development

Scholars believe that the Grantha script may have originated from the Brahmi script around the 5th century CE. While the Brahmi script in North India evolved into the Nagari script, it is thought that in South India, the Brahmi script evolved into the Grantha script. Some believe that the current Tamil script might have originated from Grantha, though Tamil scholars have rejected this theory.

It is suggested that the Northern Sanskrit scholars in South India modified the existing Tamil script to write Sanskrit, which eventually led to the emergence of the Grantha script. Therefore, it is argued that the continuity of the ancient Tamil script is represented by the Grantha script.

Several centuries ago, Grantha was widely used across South India, especially for writing in Sanskrit. In Tamil Nadu, Grantha was also used to write Manipravalam (a blend of Tamil and Sanskrit). Tamil words were written in circular script, and Sanskrit words were written in Grantha script. During the Pallava period, both Tamil and Sanskrit were respected and used together.

The Grantha script flourished during the Pallava period. As Tamil kings and South-East Asian countries expanded their influence through military conquests, the Grantha script spread to these regions. The writing systems of languages such as Burmese (Kumerian) and others evolved from Grantha, and even the Sinhala script is derived from it.

In Tamil Nadu, after the decline of Sanskrit dominance, the Grantha script also experienced a decline. However, even up to the 19th century CE, Sanskrit was still written using the Grantha script in Tamil Nadu. Later, the Devanagari script began to be used to write Sanskrit in Tamil Nadu.

Grantha Script Forms

Despite its decline, Grantha's influence persisted in some regions until the modern era, and its legacy is still visible in the scripts of many South and Southeast Asian languages.

ക	ക	ഇ	ഈ	ഉ	ഊ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū
ഋ	ൠ	ഌ	ൡ		
r̄	r̄̄	l̄	l̄̄		
ഋ	ൠ	ഌ	ൡ		
e	ai	o	au		
ഠ	ഡ				
ṭh	ḍh				

In Grantha, it is used in a similar way to the dot (pulli) in Tamil.

ക =/ka/, ക =/l/

The Grantha "ക" series of vowel and consonant combinations.

ക	ക	കാ	കി	കീ	കൗ	കൂ
k	ka	kā	ki	kī	ku	kū
ക	ക	ക	ക			
kṛ	kṝ	kl̄	kl̄̄			
ക	ക	ക	ക			
ke	kai	ko	kau			

Grantha vowel-consonant combinations

ടി = ṭi, ടീ = ṭī, ണി = ṇī

Grantha conjunct consonants

ട = ṭ, ക = t, ണ = n, ഴ = m

Grantha Conjunct Consonants

In Grantha, multiple consonants are combined to form conjunct consonants. These conjuncts were used to write quickly.

ക	ക	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ
kṣa	kta	ṅga	jñā	ñca	ñja	ttha	tra	tva
ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ
ddha	dva	nta	ntva	ntha	nda	ndha	nna	nn
ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ	ഈ				
nva	śca	śra	ṣṭa	hma				

Special Forms

ത	ത	ക	ക	ക	ഗ	സ	ത	ത
tta	ttva	ktva	kṣva	kṣṇa	gdhva	stva	ntsa	tsna

When <u> and <r> combine as a conjunct letter, the following special forms are obtained."

This refers to the special forms or shapes that occur when certain Tamil letters are joined together in specific contexts, particularly when a consonant like "u" and "r" are combined to form a ligature in Tamil script.

ക	ക	ക	ക	ക	ക
kya	khya	kra	ṅgra	ṅgrya	ddhya

The statement "ரகர மெய் இரெஃப ஆக மாறுகிறது" refers to a specific rule in Tamil grammar where the consonant <ர> (ra) changes its form to a different shape when it is used as the **initial consonant** in a consonant cluster or combination, specifically when it precedes <க> (ka).

Current Situation

In the modern era, the Grantha script is nearly extinct. However, in some Vedic schools, although the Grantha style of writing has faded, certain Grantha letters, particularly those used for Sanskrit and other foreign words, are still used today. Both Grantha and Tamil scripts appear similar in modern forms. The evolution of these two scripts from Brahmi has either increased or decreased similarly.

The development of the Grantha script in Tamil Nadu can be divided into four stages:

- Ancient
- Ornamental
- Transitional
- Modern

The ancient and ornamental types are generally referred to as Pallava Grantha. Examples of these types include inscriptions from Mahendravarman's Trichy rock-cut cave, inscriptions from Narasimha's Mamallapuram, inscriptions from Kailasanathar and Chaaluvankuppam temples, and the inscriptions of the Chola king Muthiraiyar.

The transitional Grantha inscriptions are from the period between 650 CE and 950 CE. These include inscriptions from later Pallavas (such as Nandivarman's Kasakudi inscriptions), Pandiyan Nedunchadayan's Annamalai inscriptions, and inscriptions from the Tanjore Chola dynasty.

The modern Grantha script dates back to the later Pandiyan and Vijayanagara periods and was widely used in Tamil Nadu until the early 20th century. After the introduction of printing machines, many Sanskrit books were printed in Grantha script, which had been previously written on palm leaves.

Grantha is a type of script. The word "Grantha" in Sanskrit means "book," so the script used for writing books is also referred to as Grantha. After the 3rd century CE, the Tamil script evolved from the ancient form of Tamil, and both Tamil and Grantha scripts were used in inscriptions. At the same time, Grantha was used in Tamil Nadu to write Sanskrit words and other foreign terms.

Grantha was predominantly used by the Ikshvaku kings who ruled in Andhra Pradesh. Their inscriptions, such as those from Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati, display this script. The Pallavas also used Grantha extensively, particularly during the 3rd century CE, to write in Prakrit and Sanskrit, while using Tamil script for their own language.

In Tamil Nadu, Grantha script was introduced by the Pallavas. During Pallava rule, Prakrit language gained prominence. Many Sanskrit books were written during the 4th and 5th centuries CE. Among the earliest examples are the inscriptions of Simhavarman in the 3rd century CE at the Gundur, Andhra Pradesh, and inscriptions of Sivasimhan and Maithavela from Andhra. Grantha script inscriptions from this time are also found at the Pallan temple.

In Tamil Nadu, Grantha script inscriptions often mix Sanskrit and Tamil. Examples include the inscriptions found at Simhavishnu's temple at Pallankoil, Kuram, Kaalachandran,

and Nandivarman's inscriptions at Puthukottai, Velur, and several others.

Pallava Period

After the 6th century CE, the Pallavas continued to use Grantha script in their inscriptions and documents. The Sanskrit part of the inscriptions was written in Grantha, and the Pallavas created a distinctive form of Grantha script for use in temples such as the Kailasanathar temple in Kanchipuram and the Sivalingeshwara temple in Mamallapuram.

Post-Pallava Period

Later rulers, including early Pandyas, Mutharaiyars, and some small chieftains, also used Grantha in their inscriptions. For example, inscriptions from the Pandya king Arikesari's time (found in Madurai) are written in Grantha script.

1. Arikesari's inscription discovered along the Vaikai River in Madurai is written in Grantha.
2. Other inscriptions from the time of Jatila Paranthaka Nedunchezhiyan, like those at Annamalai and Tirupparankunram, also use Grantha.
3. Inscriptions from Rajasimha's time (8th century CE) and his successors also employed Grantha in their inscriptions.
4. Inscriptions of the Chola king from the 9th century CE, such as those in the Scenthalai, refer to his military successes in Grantha.

Development of Grantha Script

The development of Grantha script in Tamil Nadu can be divided into three stages, as noted by Dancekasin:

1. **Archaic Grantha (4th – 6th centuries CE):** This is the early form of Grantha script, sometimes referred to as the "Brahmi Southern Type."
2. **Pallava Grantha (4th – 6th centuries CE):** This is the second stage of development, with Pallavas being the first to use the Grantha script widely in their inscriptions.
3. **Modern Grantha (10th century to present):** This marks the third phase of Grantha script development.

क	का	की	कु	कू	कृ	
k	ka	kā	ki	kī	ku	kū
कृ	कृ	कृ	कृ			
kr̥	kr̄	kṛ	kṝ			
के	के	को	कौ			
ke	kai	ko	kau			

ऌ = ṭi, ऍ = ṭī, ऎ = ṛī

ऌ = ṭ, ऍ = ṭ, ऎ = ṛ, ए = ṛ

ക്ഷ	ക്ത	ങ	ജ്ഞ	ഞ്ച	ഞ്ച	ട്ത	ത്ര	ട്വ
kṣa	kta	ṅga	jña	ñca	ñja	ttha	tra	tva
ഛ	ച്വ	ഞ	ഞ്വ	ന്ത	ന്ദ	ന്ധ	ന്ന	ന്ന
ddha	dva	nta	ntva	ntha	nda	ndha	nna	nn
ന്വ	ഃ	ഃ	ഃ	ഃ	ഃ	ഃ	ഃ	ഃ
nva	śca	śra	ṣṭa	hma				

Some Basic Facts about Grantha

Grantha is a script developed by the Tamils for writing Sanskrit. It is a script, not a language. The first script for Sanskrit emerged in Tamil Nadu, according to Bhavanar. For this reason, the Vedas were written in this script, and it is believed that the absence of writing is considered a form of not writing. Writing is essential for expression; without it, writing is impossible. Similar to how a person without hair would purchase a wig, many language elements (long vowel script forms) were borrowed from the Tamils by the Northern people. Grantha is derived from the ancient Tamil script. According to Bhavanar, it dates back to the 10th century BCE. The present-day Devanagari script began to form in the 4th century CE and was completed by the 11th century. There are subtle similarities between the Grantha and Devanagari scripts, which Bhavanar points out, stating that Devanagari was the script used in the cities of the northern regions. He also mentions that Devanagari was primarily used by Brahmins.

The Arrival of the Aryans and the Development of Script

It is historically argued that the Aryans were not the original inhabitants of India but came through the Khyber Pass. The Aryans did not initially have the long vowel sounds (like A, I, U) used in Tamil, which were originally a part of Tamil phonetics. These long vowels were taken by the Dravidians from Tamil and then distorted or ignored the Tamil origin. In no other Aryan language can such a long vowel system be found. In the Greek alphabet, we only find *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma*, etc., which eventually evolved into the current A, B, C, D.

The Tamil grammarian Tholkappiyar does not provide much information about Grantha, but the *Nanool* (a classical Tamil text) does discuss it. Grantha is rarely mentioned in Tamil inscriptions. In the *Tholkappiyam*, *Eṭṭuttokai*, and *Pattupattu* Grantha script is not found. Even in the *Cilappatikaram*, *Kambaramayanam*, and *Nālayira Divyaprabandham*, there are no references to Grantha.

Grantha Script and the Vedas

Some people believe that the Grantha script helps Tamils read the Vedas. However, today, Brahmins themselves no longer study the Vedas. The question is raised, "Has any Tamil person ever studied the Vedas?" Is it permissible for Tamils to read the Vedas? Can they perform temple worship after reading them? Furthermore, the Tamil language, which resisted the addition of the Sanskrit letters *ṣa*, *ja*, *ha*, *kṣa* for 2,000 years, considers the inclusion of 26 Sanskrit characters as harmful to Tamil identity. Adding Grantha or Devanagari script to Tamil is seen as an effort to reinstate Sanskrit influence.

Influence of Sanskrit on Other Languages

The mixing of Sanskrit with Tamil led to the creation of languages like Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam, causing

divisions among Tamil speakers. Sanskrit speakers have been accused of causing division by using these mixed languages.

The Spread of Grantha and Devanagari

Outside of the Aryan languages, are there scripts with similar complex phonetics in other languages of India? Before the emergence of Grantha and Devanagari scripts, Sanskrit was written using the Brahmi script from the time of King Ashoka, as mentioned by Professor Velayutham. Brahmi, a script associated with Aryans, is thought to have evolved into Grantha, which was eventually adapted by languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam.

Grantha Script Structure

In the northern languages, there are long vowel sounds classified into 16 vowels and 37 consonants. Tamil, however, has 12 vowels (அ, ஆ, இ, ஈ, etc.) and consonants (க - ண). In Grantha, 16 vowels include: *a*, *aa*, *i*, *ii*, *u*, *uu*, *ru*, *roo*, *e*, *ee*, *o*, *oo*, *am*, *ah*. Grantha also has 37 consonants such as *k*, *kha*, *ga*, *nga*, *cha*, *gha*, *chha*, *ja*, *jha*, *na*, *ta*, *tha*, *da*, *dha*, *na*, *pa*, *bha*, *ba*, *ma*, *ya*, *ra*, *la*, *va*, *sha*, *sa*, *ha*.

Results and Discussion

The Author, after extensive research on the Grantha and other literatures available, is of the view that Grantha literature and Grantha words are clearly the predecessor to most of the languages spoken now around the Globe. Grantha played a significant role in preserving Sanskrit literature in the Medieval period. Whereas other such languages adopted the Grantha script which was later modified to create their own distinct script. Grantha inscription can be found on temple walls, Copper plates, and stone monuments. Grantha's intricate and beautiful script has inspired Indian calligraphy for centuries. It is recognized by UNESCO as a part of India's intangible cultural heritage.

Acknowledgement

I want to extend heartfelt gratitude to the invaluable guidance, encouragement, and support throughout this research. Their insightful feedback and expertise were instrumental in completing this study. I am grateful for their time and effort they had invested in assisting me. And also I would like to thank Dr. S.S. Vinsley, Dean, Arunachala College of Engineering for Women, for their additional support and feedback. I am grateful for the resources and materials provided by "Arunachala college of Engineering for Women" that facilitated my learning.

Conclusion:

Grantha was used as a script for writing Sanskrit in southern India. It helped to enrich Tamil's historical script tradition and contributed to the development of languages like Malayalam. The Grantha script is a critical part of Tamil's script history and shows Tamil's role in shaping the development of South Indian writing systems. Grantha, originating from Tamil, also influenced other regional languages in India.

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