



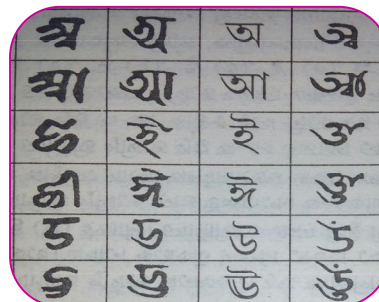
A BRIEF HISTORY OF “PROTO-BENGALI” SCRIPT OF EASTERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Script as the vehicle of languages could be termed as the most momentous invention of human being. In the Indian sub-continent, the history of writing goes back to the days of the Harappans, when they had a script of their own which is not deciphered but Aśokan Brāhmi script was the first deciphered script of India. After that in succeeding centuries India had passed through many successive stages of Brāhmi. In north India Gupta Brāhmi evolved into a distinct new script i.e. Siddhamātrika or kutila script. In Eastern India Siddhamātrika gave rise to “Proto-Bengali” script- the Eastern Indian derivatives of the Siddhamātrika. The name “Proto-Bengali” was used by Al-Beruni to indicate the alphabet of Eastern India and G.B. Ghosh termed it ‘Proto-Bengali’. Proto-Bengali is the transition stage between the Siddhamātrika and the modern Bengali script and also the precursor of modern Bengali script. The “Proto-Bengali” script was widely used in undivided ancient Bengal (West Bengal, in India and Bangladesh), Bihar, Orissa, Assam and also in Nepal during the 10th to 14th centuries of the Christian Era in the official records (inscriptions, charters etc.) of the royal dynasties of the stated region. “Proto-Bengali” gave rise to the modern scripts like Bengali, Assamese and Maithili. In the history of Indian palaeography much work has been done on the Brāhmi Scripts and its derivatives in Early India up to Gupta period but in the case of East Indian derivatives of Brāhmi, a number of works has been done on Bengali script but there is no comprehensive work on “Proto-Bengali” script which is considered as the original form of the Modern Bengali script according to R.D. Banerji. So, a comprehensive study of “Proto-Bengali” script is desideratum.



KEYWORDS: ‘Proto-Bengali’, Siddhamātrika, Script, Inscription, Brāhmi, Bengali and Dynasty.

INTRODUCTION:-

A writing system is one of the most momentous technique for symbolic representation of human language. It is developed in such a manner that it becomes really helpful to express our thoughts. For an intelligent study of the scripts across the globe an independent discipline of investigation known as Palaeography is developed for the study of writing system. This field of study is one of the least studied subjects of Epigraphy. It helps to examine the form and function of the individual alphabet included in the formation of words. The efficacy of script is correctly justified by B.N. Mukherjee’s opinion in these words “script as the vehicle of languages indeed form a major source of knowledge of the achievements of man through the ages since his first attempt to impress his mind through writing”.¹

In the Indian subcontinent the history of writing goes back to the days of Harappans, when they had developed their own script which is unfortunately not deciphered till date. It was a kind of pictograph and written from right to left and left to right i.e. boustrophedon. Many attempts have been made to decipher the script but till now only some of the signs and symbols are identified. Then there is a long gap. It is not

before the 3rd century B.C. that we find the evidences of the use of AśokanBrāhmi in this subcontinent. Though some recent discoveries encouraged us to find out the missing link between this long gap.

AśokanBrāhmi script, which was first deciphered by James prince in 1837 is considered as mother of all scripts prevalent in India. After Maurya period in succeeding centuries India had passed through many following stages of Brāhmi respectively Sunga Brahmi, KushanaBrāhmi and Gupta Brāhmi (The famous epigraphist D.C.Sircar identified three stages of development of Brāhmi script in Northern India- Early Brāhmi (3rd century B.C.E -1st century B.C.E), Middle Brāhmi (1st century B.C.E-3rd century C.E) and Late Brāhmi (4th century C.E- 6th century C.E).² There are many reasons responsible behind this kind of transformation; say for example the use of new writing style, writing material, tools and new techniques.

The significant change in its gradual evolutionary trend can be marked during the Gupta Age and Post-Gupta Age. In north India Gupta Brahmi evolved into a distinct new script i.e. Siddhamātrika. Siddhamātrika firstly gave rise to Eastern Nāgri and later on in Eastern India it again gave rise to the "Proto-Bengali" script which is considered as the Eastern Indian derivatives of the Siddhamātrika. G.B. Ghosh, one of the greatest authorities on Indian Palaeography, and his followers has called it 'Proto-Bengali'.³ But the name 'Gaudi' was used by Al-Biruni in the 11th century A.D. to indicate the alphabet of Eastern India,⁴ and it is undoubtedly a more suitable name since the use of the alphabet in question was not confined to Bengal.

"PROTO-BENGALI" SCRIPT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT:

The "Proto-Bengali" script – as one of the derivatives of the Brahmi script- is closely associated to the Devanagari script- a sister script used to write the Hindi language. Although the 'Proto-Bengali' and Bengali script is used to write Bengali language which was primarily used in West Bengal and in Bangladesh, but later on it is also used to write the Assamese language, and a number of other Eastern Indian languages. The "Proto-Bengali" script was widely used in undivided ancient Bengal (Both West Bengal, in India & in Bangladesh), Bihar, Orissa, Assam and also in Nepal during the 10th to 14th centuries of the Christian Era in the official records of the Royal Dynasties of the stated regions. The 'Proto-Bengali' script had evolved by the end of the 10th century A.D or beginning of the 11th century A.D. The actual difference between the Siddhamātrika and "Proto-Bengali" of the first half of the 11th century is rather difficult to find out. According to G.B. Ghosh, "towards the end of the 11th century, the Nagari inscriptions of Eastern India show such distinct traces of changes leading up to the modern Bengali Script and these changes become so numerous in the 12th century, that it is possible to class their alphabets as 'Proto-Bengali'.⁵

The 'Proto-Bengali' or "Proto-Bengali" script was widely used in 'Purvadesha' or the Eastern country by several important dynasties like the Pālas (750 A.D. - 1200 A.D.), the Senas (1160 A.D. - 1215 A.D.), the Chandras (865 A.D. – 1055 A.D.), the Varmanas (1055 A.D. – 1145 A.D.) and the later Devas (775 A.D. – 1250 A.D.) of Bengal; the Bhanjas of Orissa, the Somavāsīs of south Kosala, the Eastern Gangas (537 A.D. – 1434 AD.) and in the Chittagong inscription of Damodara (the Royal Dynasty, who issued this copper plate charter, is not known from any other sources). So it is easily assumed by the above statement that the 'Proto-Bengali' script was actually used in Undivided Bengal (Present West Bengal and Bangladesh), Bihar, Assam, Orissa and also in Nepal between the 10th to the 14th centuries of Christian Era.

Regarding the origin of the "Proto-Bengali" script S.N. Chakravarty opined that, "In Irda grant of the Kamboja king Nayapaladeva and the Bangarh grant of Mahipala I we came across the 'Proto-Bengali' script for the first time".⁶ According to Dipak Chattopadhyay in the Bhagalpur grant of Narayanapala we found the 'Proto-Bengali' letter in almost complete form.⁷ The "Proto-Bengali" script in turn gave rise to the Modern Eastern scripts, namely, Modern Bengali, Assamese and Maithili. undivided Bengal region (modern west Bengal & Bangladesh). Modern Bengali script has developed from the Proto-Bengali Script. In this sense 'Proto-Bengali' is the transition stage between the Siddhamātrika and the modern Bengali script and precursor of modern Bengali script.

In the history of Indian Palaeography many works have been done on the Brahmi Script and its derivatives in Early India up to the Gupta period but after that no such work has done on any other scripts. Very similarly to the fact that in the case of East Indian derivatives of Brahmi, a number of work has been

done on Bengali Script but there is no comprehensive work on 'Proto-Bengali' or 'Gaudi' script which is considered as the original form of the Bengali script according to R.D.Banerjee.⁸ Only those scholars who have been worked on Bengal Palaeography has mentioned or given some glimpse about the 'Proto-Bengali' script. But till now there is no such research work or comprehensive work on the 'Proto-Bengali' script and its evolution and regional variations. Keeping this thing in mind the present paper has been made to focus this script subject to further study.

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