

Semitic countries into Europe, why should not alphabets have had the same origin and the same course? Did not the Hindūs invent for themselves their own grammar, their own science of language, their own systems of philosophy, logic, algebra, and music? Have they not an immense literature on these and other subjects, much of which must have been written down at least 600 years B. C.? And are there not references in this literature to the existence of writing in India in very ancient times? for instance, in the Vāsishṭha Dharma-sūtra of the later Vedic period, in the Laws of Manu<sup>1</sup>, in Pāṇini, who lived about 400 B. C.<sup>2</sup>, in the Pāli Canon of the Buddhists which refers to writing schools and writing materials<sup>3</sup>. And again, do not the actual inscriptions of King Aśoka of the third century B. C. exhibit a remarkably perfect system of alphabetical signs, and many varying forms in different districts of India, postulating several centuries of antecedent development<sup>4</sup>? And if no Indian epigraphs of an earlier date than the reign of Aśoka have yet been discovered, is not that due to the circumstance that the art of incising letters on stone and metal only came into use when great Hindū kings arose, whose empire was sufficiently extensive to make it necessary to issue edicts and grants to their subjects? Bearing all this in mind, may it not be contended that if there has been any plagiarism in the matter of alphabets, the borrowing may have been *from* the Hindūs rather than *by* them?

Such questions as these have often been addressed to me by learned Pandits, and it must be confessed that they are by no means to be brushed aside as unworthy of consideration. Quite the reverse. They contain many statements to which no exception can be taken. But my present object is not to furnish incontestable proof of the derivation of Indian alphabets from a Phœnician source. It is rather to point out to Indian scholars that even admitting (with some eminent authorities) that there is good ground for claiming an indigenous origin for Hindū alphabets, many of the letters composing them offer points of contact and affinity with those of Phœnicia, and therefore with those of Greece and Rome and modern Europe.

And at the outset it must be frankly acknowledged that the first phonographic alphabet brought to light on ancient Phœnician monuments constituted by no means a perfect alphabetic system. It had, no doubt, advanced beyond the ideographic stage, and even to some extent beyond the syllabic, but its phonograms were only twenty-two in number, and mainly represented consonants. It had not attained to the level of an alphabet in which vowel symbols are promoted to an equality of representation with consonantal, and treated as compeers, not as mere secondary appendages. And even to this day, the Semitic alphabets connected with the Phœnician—viz. the Hebrew, Aramæan, and Arabian—are nearly as imperfect, and very little better than, so to speak, consonantal skeletons, wanting the life-blood which vowels only can impart.

Indeed, the imperfection of the Phœnician script is well shown by the fact that the Greeks who, as every one admits, were indebted to the Phœnicians for their rudimentary consonantal method of writing, had no sooner received it (probably quite as early as 800 B. C.) than they began to remedy its defects, and gradually developed out of it a true alphabetic method of their own, which was ultimately made to flow from left to right in opposition to the Semitic method.

Similarly, too, the Romans when they had accepted the Phœnician graphic signs from the Greeks, found it necessary to improve upon them, and ultimately developed out of them an even more practical alphabetic system.

But surely these two facts may be appealed to as making it not improbable that if the Greeks and Romans, two highly intellectual races, sprung from the same Āryan stock as the Brāhmins, condescended to accept certain rudimentary phonograms from the Phœnicians, and to expand them into alphabets suited to the expression of their own languages, the Brāhmins also might have deigned, if not to accept a foreign alphabet, at least to improve their own graphic system by modifications introduced through contact with Semitic races.

Nor should it be forgotten that in later times the Hindūs did actually borrow a Semitic alphabet from Arabia for the expression of their vernacular Hindī<sup>5</sup>.

No doubt it must be admitted that, had any overmastering conviction of the necessity for the general use of written signs taken hold of the Hindū mind in early times, India would not have consented to be beholden to other countries for even improvements in her own forms of writing.

But the most patriotic of India's patriots must acknowledge that the Hindūs have always preferred oral to written communications. Indeed, although a vast literature exists in Sanskrit, no word exists exactly corresponding to our English word 'literature<sup>6</sup>;' and even if such a word were available, true

<sup>1</sup> In Book viii, 168 written legal documents are mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> He gives the words *lipi* and *libi* in one of his rules (iii, 2, 21).

<sup>3</sup> The bark of the Bhoj (or Birch) tree and the leaf of the palm seem to have constituted the chief material used by the Hindūs till the introduction of paper by the Muhammadans. No such durable materials as Egyptian papyrus or European parchment—the latter being prohibited on account of its impurity—seem to have been employed.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3, p. xxv.

<sup>5</sup> Hindī when so transliterated is called Hindūstānī or Urdū.

<sup>6</sup> *Litera*, 'a letter,' is derived from *lino*, 'to smear,' just as Sanskrit *lipi* from *lip*. If a corresponding word were to be used in Sanskrit it would be *lipi-śāstra*. The word *akshara*, which is the Sanskrit for a letter, properly means 'indelible,' and this meaning seems to point to the use of letters in early times for inscriptions on stones and metal. Similarly the first meaning of *lekha* is 'scratching with a sharp point.'