

# Eternal Letters and their Immortal Stories

Inscriptions from 3rd Century BCE to 16th Century CE

## Objective

The intention of presenting this paper on rich heritage and treasure of Inscriptions with everyone, especially students, professors, designers is that they become aware of the beauty of our ancient scripts, their interesting evolution and know their importance in our history and current times. It will also help them realise the need for their preservation and mainly the necessity to revisit, relook and get inspired. I also aim to revamp our perspective of looking at this subject in order to develop new type designs and calligraphic styles. The paper may also help shed light on a neglected subject while also creating new perspectives and opportunities in the field of design.

## Key words

Ancient script, Epigraphy, Inscriptions, Records, Evolution of scripts, Literature, Poetry, Brahmi script, 3rd century BCE, 15th century CE, Tamil and Grantha script, Multilingual scripts, Writing styles, Ashokan period, Gupta period, Islamic calligraphy, Culture, Design

## Abstract

In my quest to explore modern and ancient scripts, I have travelled across India. This expedition has deepened my understanding of the origins of our scripts and the regional flavour that is impacted their evolution. I could study writing styles, the aesthetics, the writing culture and how it has developed over time. It has been an enriching experience. Today I have a huge collection of these inscriptions in forms of photographs.

In this paper I want to discuss about 6 different specimens and share interesting stories.

These inscriptions are chosen as they are not only of remarkable beauty and provide historical evidences but also shed light on various Indian scripts and the writing styles across different periods.

I have always felt a deep connection to them and they are a great source of inspiration. The inscriptions to me are important references into the history of writing systems, typography and design.

# 1. Ashokan stone, Junagad, Gujarat

This stone inscription found in Gujarat carved in Ashokan Brahmi Script

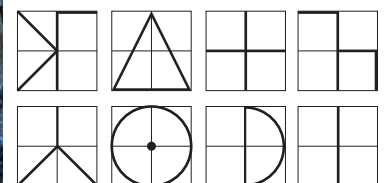
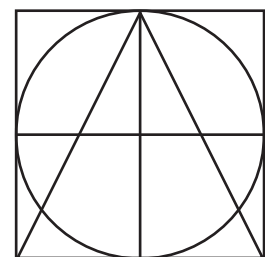
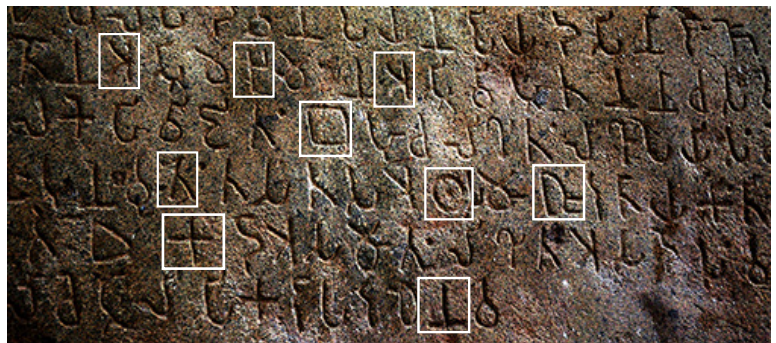
The Script was a page out of Indian history. The experts from Archaeological survey had dated the inscription as one from the 3rd Century BCE.

There are 14 inscriptions on this rock tells the story about the social, political, religious aspects of those times. They also shed light on the extent of the kingdom of Samrat Ashoka, the influence of Buddhism on his thinking and way of ruling, the respect he had towards Buddhist principles and the religion as a whole. Regarding information and in preservation of a beautiful script, this rock is truly a piece of heritage for India.

The Ashokan Brahmi Scripts is a great example of simplicity in alphabet design.

These Brahmi characters are simple, beautiful, easy to read and carefully designed based on simple geometric forms as shown in the diagram below. It is one of the most matured writing systems of that period.

This ancient and remarkable script is considered the mother of all scripts in India and South East Asia.



# 1. The Shravanabelgola Inscription

There are many inscriptions in this complex. We will discuss two of these inscriptions.

## a) The Shravanabelgola Inscription of Nandisena

The Shravanabelgola inscription of Nandisena dated 7th century, tells the story of one of the earliest inscriptions in Kannada Language. They contain a beautiful description of the great Saint Nandisena and his journey to heaven. Often examined to study the development in Kannada Literature, these inscriptions also shed the light on the cursive, clean, simple yet graceful writing style of 7th century Old Kannada. Here one can notice the well-designed Kannada alphabets and their typographic composition. The cursive character / nature of the alphabets is seen throughout the inscription, making it an exquisite specimen. It speaks volumes of the skill possessed by the artist / scribe who has carved it.



## b) Shri Chamundaraya Inscription

Near the left foot of the idol, one can see two lines of the old Nagari (Devanagari).

श्री चामुण्डराजे करवयिले (Shri Chamundaraya created this)

श्री गंगाराजे सुत्ताले करवयिले (Shri Gangaraje made the compound wall)

Dating back to 983 CE, this is the oldest known inscriptions of Marathi Language and the Nagari Script. It also gives an idea about the Nagari writing style belonging to that period. Upon close observation one can learn more about treatment given to Jodaksharas (conjoined letters) and how stylishly the alphabets were written. At the same time can notice that the 'Shirorekha' is used for individual letters instead of the its traditional use for words. One can see a different style of writing of writing the Devanagari alphabet.



### 3. Brihadisvara Temple

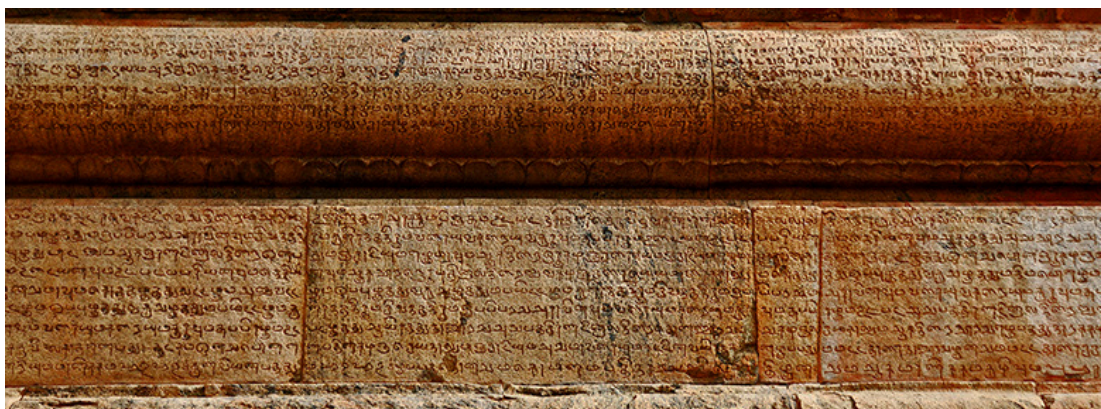
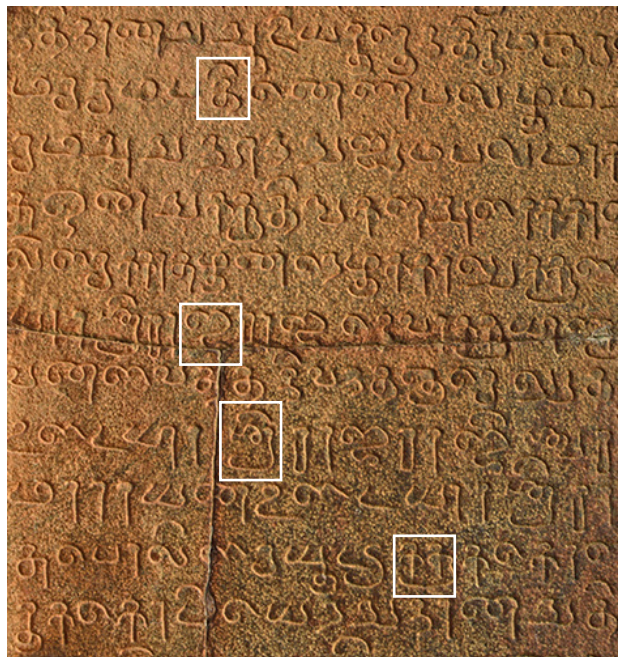
The Brihadisvara Temple is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The base of the walls of the Brihadisvara temple are adorned with numerous inscriptions in the Tamil and Grantha scripts. All inscriptions have basic information about kings and donors written in Sanskrit and Tamil. They describe the numerous gifts of land, money, silver, gold, precious gems and jewelry received by the temple. Inscriptions also describe how donated gold coins and money were loaned for eternity to the inhabitants of nearby villages by the temple treasury at a set interest rate.

Along with the historical information it also reflects the lettering style in use in that period.

The Tamil Grant script inscription shows the characteristics of ancient Grantha script and the evolution of the Grantha to Tamil script. Observing this transition / evolution is a part of a deeper study of the process. These cursive letters look beautiful the way they are composed and engraved on stone in such a large area. It takes considerable skill and proficiency to maintain consistency in characters while carving on stone. Excellent craftsmanship is evident in the fluency of the work.

The beauty of these artistic letters is very inspiring. Also, it is treasure for script lovers.



## 4. The Ibrahim Rouza

A Showcase of the Artistic Potential of Islamic Calligraphy

Bijapur or officially called Vijayapura is a fortified town in the state of Karnataka. The seat of the Adilshahi has many monuments built by various Sultans of this dynasty. The most striking one owing to its beauty and calligraphic decorations is the Ibrahim Rouza.

This impressive tomb and the accompanying mosque facing it from the west were constructed by Ibrahim Adil Shah II (AD 1580 - 1626), the 6th Sultan of the dynasty. It was built under the supervision of architect Malik Sandal. As you enter this place, what catches your eye are the marvellously decorated walls and carved doors. They are so elaborate and full of exquisite calligraphic compositions that one cannot help wonder about the skill and artistic superiority of artists of that time.

i was spellbound just thinking of the immense work, mastery of design and great imagination that went in crafting what feel is one of the finest examples of decorations in India that bring out the ornamental qualities of Islamic Calligraphy. Each surface is detailed with ornate designs, delicate and bold calligraphic strokes and verses from Quran imparting a regal and divine atmosphere to the place. In various Islamic structures across the world, one can invariably notice the extensive and inspired use of calligraphy that has definitely expanded the application potential of this art form.



# 6. Raula Vela

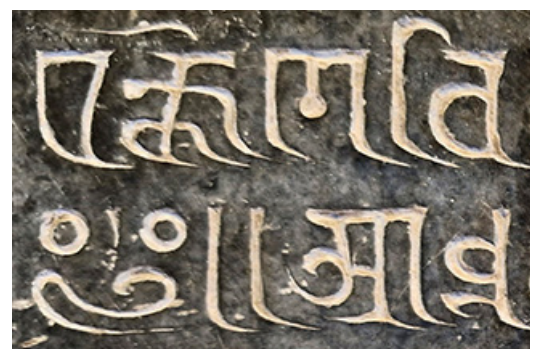
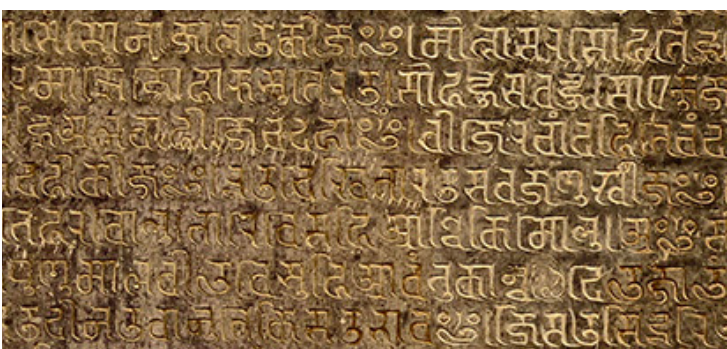
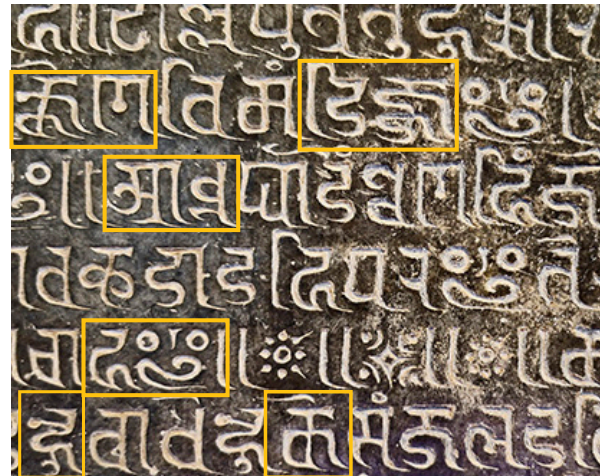
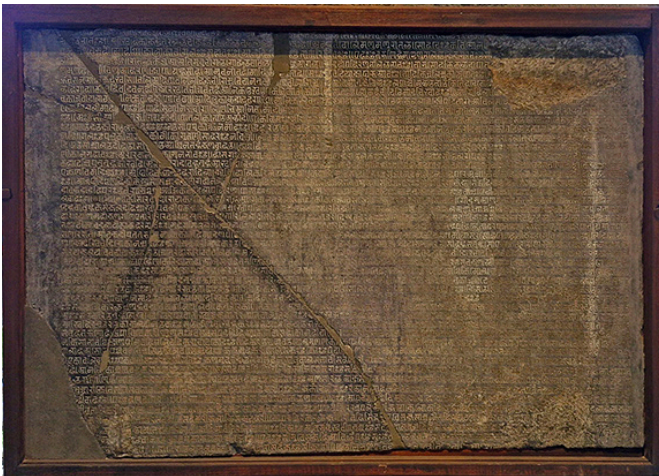
## Poetry on Stone

The Rāūla Vela, which is a poem by Roda written in approx. late 12th century.

This well-preserved inscription is from Dhār, Madhya Pradesh, India and currently housed in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai.

The text of the poem written in the Nagari Script, has stanzas in 6 contemporary dialects while the underlying dialect represents a transitional stage between Apabhra śa and the earliest forms of Hindi. The dialects are Maithili, Marathi, Western Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali and Malawi.

This inscription is a superior example of Nagari writing. The letters and their shapes are very decorative and the thick and thin style is very eye – catching. There is a certain rhythm and charm to them. The ‘Shirorekha’ is seen on each individual letter instead on words which is the norm today. The treatment given to writing the diacritics is also peculiar but charming. The style offers a new perspective to viewing letters.



# Conclusion

If we closely observe and study all inscriptions, the major influencing factors on various scripts become evident. The prevailing religions, architectural styles, type of monuments being built, methods of maintaining regional records, social, economic and socio-cultural environments, the stage of evolution of the language and its script, the prevailing philosophies and their impact on the masses can be understood.

The inscriptions are not just historical evidences but rather storytellers who narrate the journey of a script, its letterforms through different periods. When we examine the inscriptions, we also get an insight about their creators and the times they lived in.

We can see how the basic shapes have undergone transformations. The script itself shows beautiful variety as each artist / writer adds his unique mark to the writings. It is sometimes cursive or simple and straight and at times is almost calligraphic in nature. The variety of these letters also reveal the scribe's inclination towards experimenting, the desire to explore different possibilities and also the yearning to create a unique writing that showcases his skill making the story more interesting for us.

The inscriptions show different writing styles that were periodically refined. Generations of artists, calligraphers, designers, type educators have been inspired by these scribes and now can work towards enriching the field by creating new styles.

# References

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brihadisvara\\_Temple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brihadisvara_Temple)

