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THE DEVELOPMENT OF 'BOX-HEADED SCRIPT' AND ITS ORIGIN (4th CENTURY A.D-7th CENTURY A.D.)

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Abstract:-This paper is based on Indian Palaeography. We know that India had passed through many successive stages of Brahmi script and in north India, the Brahmi script was used over a vast area from 3rd century B.C to the Gupta Era. In the history of Indian Palaeography much work has been done on the Brahmi script and its derivatives in Early India. But this paper explores a comprehensive study of a hitherto less known script i.e. 'Box-Headed Script', which is developed in central India, mostly in Madhya Pradesh from the 4th century A.D. to 7th century A.D. in the official records of some famous dynasties like the Vakatakas, the Sarabhapuriyas, the Panduvamsis, the Nalas, the Kadambas and some minor ruling dynasties of South Kosala. In the present paper an attempt has been made to give a comprehensive knowledge about this unique 'Box-Headed Script' and its origin which throw significant light on the Palaeographical Study of the stated period adding to the already existing Palaeographical knowledge.

Keywords:Script, Brahmi, Box-Headed, Inscription, Origin, Development.

INTRODUCTION

India had passed through many successive stages of Brahmi script. In north India, the Brahmi script was used over a vast area. During the Sunga, Scytho-Parthian and in Gupta period (i.e. C. 2nd century B.C to the 4th century A.D.) certain characteristic features developed in the Brahmi script. D.C Sircar broadly categories the stages of development into 'early' 'middle' and 'late' Brahmi periods corresponding to the third through first century B.C., the first century B.C. through third century A.D. and the fourth through the sixth centuries A.D. respectively, though others refer to his 'late Brahmi' as 'Gupta Brahmi'. A.H. Dani prefers to use only regional and geographical categories. From the 6th to about 10th century A.D., the inscriptions in north India were written in a script which was called by different names like Siddhamatrika and Kutila. From the 8th century A.D., the Siddhamatrika script developed into Sarada script in Kashmir and Punjab, into Proto-Bengali or Gaudi in Bengal and Orissa and into Nagari in other parts of north India. Nagari script was used widely in northern India from the 10th century onwards. The use of Nandinagari, a variant of Nagari script, is mostly confined to the Karnataka region. In central India, mostly in Madhya Pradesh, the inscriptions of the Vakatakas, and the kings of Sarabhapura and Kosala were written in what is known as 'Box-Headed Script' (4th century A.D-7th century A.D.), which is our central theme of the present paper.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

The 'box-headed script' which was developed during 4th century A.D. to 7th century A.D. in the records of the kings of the Vakatakas, the Sarabhapuriyas, the Nalas, the Panduvamsis, the Kadambas and the Pallavas is indeed a script of great value and importance. As we know in the history of palaeography much work has been done on the Brahmi and its derivatives in early India. There is only one chapter on 'box-headed script' in the book entitled 'Palaeography of Orissa' by Dr. Subrata Kumar Acharya. While discussing the political history of the Sarabhapuriyas and the Panduvamsis ('Inscription of the Sarabhapuriyas, Panduvamsis and Somavamsins' vol-1 &

2.) Dr. Ajay Mitra Sastri has discussed the palaeographic features of box-headed script. Dr. Snigdha Tripathy has also mentioned about the box-headed script in course of her writings but not in detail. Again Richard Salomon in his book 'Indian Epigraphy' only refers to this script which is prevalent in early India. As there is no comprehensive work on the origin and development on box-headed script; it is desideratum to work on this kind of scripts which are not getting much attention.

'BOX-HEADED SCRIPT' AND ITS FEATURES:

In central India from the fourth to the seventh centuries A.D., a script evolved which substituted square boxes for the serifs of the northern scripts, and introduced several other elaborations. This new kind of script found fully developed in the inscription of Vakatakas, and the kings of Sarabhapura and Kosala besides the Nalas, Kadambas, and Panduvamsis. In most of the records of these ruling dynasties we found that the heads of the letters bear small squares, which are either hollow or filled in. These squares, to which on account of their resemblances to small boxes the script owes the name 'Box-Headed', are, like the wedges, artificial development of serifs [G.Buhler 1962:101]. The chief characteristic of this script according to Fleet are "the peculiar box-head tops of the letters, formed by sinking four short strokes in the shape of a square and leaving a block of stone or copper in the centre of them" [J.F.Fleet 1971:19]. But A.H.Dani placed slight different character. According to him, this script was characterized by "square head-marks" and classified into two sub-varieties viz. "solid square" and "hollow square" head marks [A.H.Dani 1986:81]. The hollow head marks are usually found on the top left of the letters and they are seen in the form of perfect squares. The solid filled in, squares probably have been invented by writers who used ink, and the hollow ones by persons writing with a stylus, who feared to tear their palm-leaves. But later on these box-head turned into solid rectangle and sometime box is projected in the two sides of the letter and some other features like, curtailment in breath of letter-forms, implication of spiral and curled form of auspicious sound like Om, and in the mark of interpunctuation are seen in the box-headed script, with some changes in initial vowels, vowels, consonants, and in medials. These are the basic characteristics of the same script. Both varieties of "box-heads" occurs occasionally or constantly in other districts and in connection with other alphabets and even in some of the Campa inscriptions from further India [Auguste Barth & Abel Bergaigne 1885:23].

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE BOX-HEADED SCRIPT:

During the 4th century A.D to 7th century A.D. this new style of writing was evolved in eastern Malwa and Vidarbha. It is assumed that the Vakatakas were mainly responsible for developing this script [S.K.Acharya 2005:72]. From the latter half of the 4th century A.D. in two records of Gupta dynasty this script was used. In the subsequent period we find the use of box-headed script in the records of the Vakatakas, the kings of Sarabhapuriyas and Kosala and in the copper-plates of the Nalas, the Kadambas and the Panduvamsis. The area where this script was developed includes Sagar district and Vidisha district of Madhya-Pradesh in Gupta period, eastern Malwa and Vidarbha in Vakataka age, South Kosala (Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh and the Sambalpur region of Orissa) during Sarabhapuriya rule, Koraput-Baster area (South Kosala) of Orissa during Nala rule, Vijayanti or Banavasi area during Kadamba rule, and south Kosala during the rule of the Panduvamsi.

SOURCES OF THE PRESENT STUDY:

In this topic our important source material are the copper-plate charters or sasanas, seals, lithic and temple inscription of the above mentioned ruling dynasties. By a thorough observation and analysis of these records we are competent to understand the subject-matter.

USAGE IN THE OFFICIAL RECORDS:

This unique featured "box-headed script" was used by some great ruling families. First of all, the Guptas, then followed by the Vakatakas, the Sarabhapuriyas, the Nalas, the Kadambas, and the Panduvamsis during 4th century A.D. to 7th century A.D.. But after 7th century A.D. this script was gradually disappeared or it is better to say become unavailable in the latter records. Of these ruling dynasties Samudragupta and Chandragupta II are the two famous Gupta kings who used some character of the box-headed script in their inscriptions. But later on the Vakataka kings like, Rudrasena I, Pravarasena II, Prithvisena II, Vindyasakti II, and queen Prabhavatigupta and their feudatories like Bharatabala and Vyaghradeva, the Nala kings like Arthapati-Bhattaraka, Bhavadattavarman, Tustikara; the Sarabhapuriya kings like Narendra, Jayaraja, Mahajayaraja, Sudevaraja, Pravararaja and Vyaghraraja. The king of Panduvamsi of Mekala, Surabala, the kings of Panduvamsis of South Kosala like, Nannaraja, Tivaradeva, Sivagupta, and Sivagupta Balarjuna; the Kadamba king Santivarman [Fleet, IA. XXI, 93] used the "box-headed script" in their records. This script was not only used by these dynasties only but rather some minor ruling families of south Kosala like, Rajarshitulyakulas and Parvatadvarakas used the same script in their

records [S.K. Acharya 2005:71] and with the help of all the records of these kings and ruling families we can capable to trace out the origin as well as the evolutionary process of the “Box-headed script”.

We also must take notice of the development of this script on the coins and seals of the ruling families. It is in the Vakataka records we find that the charters were written in a systematic manner and it looks very symmetrical and beautiful in a small area. The characters are not scattered asymmetrically and haphazardly. We can rather consider it as a scientific development in script writing. But later on in the records of the Panduvamsis and some minor chief ruling families this development is slight deviated and after them in the 8th century A.D. this new style of script writing was gradually disappeared in the written records.

Now the question is, can this ruling families had issued any coin? If so, then can they use the same box-headed script on their coins? And the answer is yes! The Nalas and the Sarabhapuriyas of Kosala were issued some gold coins and we find the same box-head character not only in their coins but also in the seals.



Image-1



image-2



image-3

[Images Courtesy: N.Law (ed.), Indian Historical Quarterly, Vol-XXI, Calcutta, 1945., P.294.]

The development of box-headed script was not only seen in the official records of the above mentioned dynasty but also in their coins and seals we find the same alphabets. It means the development is not limited within the official records but also found on their coins and seals.

In 1939 at the village Edanga in Baster state a hoard of Nala coins was discovered. They are round in shape and are made of gold. Of these the most important are the gold coins of three Nala rulers. They are all single-die coins, with the device and the legend embossed in relief on the obverse and the reverse remained blank. The space on the obverse of each coin is divided into two parts by lines, above these appeared the figures of the humped bull and the crescent and below the legend of king who issued (image.1- coin of Bhavadattavarman, image.2- coin of Arthapati, and image.3-coin of Varaharaja) it in the box-headed character [N.Law (ed.) 1945:294].



Image-4

[Image Courtesy: S.Tripathy., Early and Medieval Coins and Currency System of orissa (circa 300 B.C. to 1568 A.D.), Calcutta, 1986., P.71]

Again in a gold coin which was issued by the Sarabhapuriya king Prasannamitra we found the box-headed character. Similar to the Nala coins the coin has embossed only in obverse, and the reverse remained blank. On obverse side an effigy of Garuda with human face, standing on the horizontal line which divides the coin into two parts. The wings of the Garuda are spread out, to his proper right, are the crescent moon, a round dot above and a wheel encircled by dots; to his proper left, the so-called sun symbol and a conch shell opening to right or left. And below the horizontal line the legend Sri-Prasannamitra in box-headed character was depicted [S.Tripathy 1986:71].



Image.5



image.6

[Image No.5, Courtesy: S.Tripathy., Early and Medieval Coins and Currency System of orissa (circa 300 B.C. to 1568 A.D.), Calcutta, 1986., P.71].

[Image No.6, Courtesy: N.Law(ed.), Indian Historical Quarterly, Vol-XXI, Calcutta,1945., P.294.]

We have already shown the development of the box-headed script in the coins of the Nalas and the Sarabhapuriyas. Now we are here showing some examples of the use of same script in a seal of the Sarabhapuriya king Mahasudevaraja. It is known as Gajalaxmi seal having the legend in two lines below the same device. The characters are in box-head variety (image.5). It gives the name of the father of Mahasudevaraja and mention about a Mahasamanta as the dutaka, who delivered the document [Ibid 1986:71]. This variety of script was also found in the records of minor ruling families of Kalinga. For example, in komarti plate of Chandravarman the box-headed character is represented in a word consist of four letters. Of these the last can be made out as kta. But it is read as 'pitribhakta' [N.Law (ed.) 1945:294].

Is there any Influence?

This box-headed script bears a very unique and distinct character. Here generally a question arises that from where this script got influence? According to G.Buhler 'traces of the influence of the northern alphabets are visible in the box-headed script just as in the western variety' [G.Buhler 1962:102]. But it is assumed that this script is characterized by the box-headed variety of Deccan. The southern characters had penetrated into south Kosala long before with the Satavahana advance into the north. It is believed that, this influx is coming from southern regions to north through intermediary region like South Kosala. Henceforth the southern and northern ideas and traditions are easily flows adversely through the same region. In consequence the Deccan style had spread over a wide area and became the accepted form of writing in many areas during the 4th century A.D. to the 7th century A.D.. And due to this reason the characters of the records under study considered as the southern class of alphabets. Not only in the records of South Kosala but, also in the letter forms of the Vakatakas of Vidarbha are pre-eminently south Indian and more importantly in them we see a development of style of writing known in the late Satavahana records [S.K. Acharya 2005:76]. A comparative study of the scripts belonging to south India with central India within the stated time span we can considered that, the box-headed script was influenced by the southern class of alphabets.

It is assumed that the box-headed character is also a kind of regional variation which is developed during the 4th century A.D to 7th century A.D. Variation means some change or peculiarity in letter forms. The writing materials, usage of different hand, and writing tools are mainly responsible for this variation. But in the case of Box-headed script we found that above theories are not applicable. According to A.H.Dani, it is "natural neither to pen nor to stylus" [A.H.Dani 1986:171]. So it is better to hold that this script was developed locally and emerged as a distinct writing style. But we have to remember one thing that the box-headed script is a distinguished feature of Deccan and it was directly imported from there in central India and remained as a standard script for a fairly long time from the 4th century A.D. to 7th century A.D. in the records of already stated ruling powers. This script was mostly used by the rulers of the Vakatakas, Sarbhapuriyas, Nalas, Panduvamsis etc. in their records. But there are no references of any special engraver or artisan class whose profession was to engrave box-headed character. If any special engraver or artisan class were existed for developing the same script then there is no reason should be left for the sudden decline of the script within three centuries. The reason is very simple if any artisan class were existed then it is very natural they revealed their knowledge of writing hereditarily. So it is assumed that the grants or records were written by the order from royal court and by the officials who took the responsibility for engraving the records. So, here we have some ground to consider this box-headed script as a court script.

We cannot consider this stage of development as totally influenced by any dynasties or any contemporaries. If we try to relate any influence or counter influences with box-headed script, then this generalization seems to be inconsistent. Here I want to remind one suggestion of J.F.Fleet, "it is perfectly plain that the alphabets varied, not according to the dynasties, but according to localities and in establishing any system of comparative palaeography, we must select territorial, not dynastic names" [J.F. Fleet, CII, III, 1971:3]. Actually this script was definitely

developed locally and independently. The head-marks which are a main feature of box-headed script are only ornamental feature of the some script having no essential connection with the letter-forms. Sometime this script showed a nice piece of calligraphic art. We can see sometime that, the top horizontal stroke of the box is still projected not only in single side but rather it projected on both the sides and the left side stroke is still drawn in a slanting manner [S.K. Acharya 2005:75]. These features are obviously supply a specimen of excellent calligraphy in hollow box-headed character.

Origin of 'Box-Headed Script':

We are already mentioned about the box-headed script; it's characteristic, geographical extent of use, and also about the ruling powers that used and developed this script. But now in following pages we will try to trace out from where this 'box-headed' variety was actually originated.

The box-headed script which was a distinct feature of south, first came to the Deccan with the Satavahana advancement into the north and remained as a standard script for next three centuries. The letter forms of the Vakatakas of Vidarbha are pre-eminently south Indian and in them we see a development of the style of writing known in the late Satavahana records. According to Dr. Subrata Kumar Acharya, this new featured script was evolved in eastern Malwa and Vidarbha and the Vakatakas were mainly responsible for developing this. And it is really true that, the same script was developed mainly in the records of the Vakatakas, the Sarabhapuriyas, the Nalas, the Kadambas and the Panduvamsis. So here one question definitely comes to our mind that, why the Vakatakas did not use the Gupta Brahmi though they had a good relation with the Guptas. In answer it is assumed that, the Vakatakas actually used the box-headed script for their convenience and it is natural that, as their concentrating area comprised mainly in central Deccan they take the script which is developed within their region naturally and independently. There is no reference to any engraver class in the records of the ruling dynasties mentioned above, responsible for developing the box-headed script. It can be assumed here that the ruling dynasty of the above mentioned region employed their officer to write their records as they were very much keen to use locally developed box-headed script. Again it is assumed that the process of simplification in writing helped to grow this new kind of script. And this simple version of writing was adopted by the courtiers of the Vakatakas.

conso -nants	THE GUPTAS	THE VAKATAKAS	THE SARABHAPURIYAS
Ka	 (Udaygiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II)	 (Jamb plate of Pravarasena)	 (Rawan plate of Narendra)
Ca	 (Udaygiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II)	 (Belora plate of Pravarasena II)	 (kuruds plate of Narendra)
Da	 (Udaygiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II)	 (Belora plate of Pravarasena II)	 (same source, plate-3)
Pa (Pu)	 (Udaygiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II)	 (Riddhapur plate of Prabhavatigupta)	 (same source plate-2)
Ma	 (Eran inscription of Samudragupta)	 (siwani plate of Pravarasena II)	 (Mallar plate of Jayaraja)
Ha	 (Udaygiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II).	 (Dudia plate of Pravarasena II)	 (Mallar plate of Jayaraja)

Chart Shows the similarities in 'box-head' character was found in Gupta dynastic record

It is generally believed that for the first time the 'box-headed characters' are made their appearance in Gupta

inscriptions. Especially in two inscriptions we found some characters which are very similar to 'box-head' variety of South Kosala. One of them is the Eran inscription of Samudragupta (See Plate no.1) and another is the Udaygiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II (See Plate no.2). The first one was found from Eran, the ancient Airikina the chief town of the Khurai Tahsil of the Sagar district in Madhya Pradesh [J.F.Fleet 1971:221] and another was found from Udaygiri hill, with a small village about two miles to the north-west of Bhilsa, the chief town of Vidisha district, in Madhya Pradesh [Ibid: 242]. In these two famous inscriptions we found some characters which are very similar to box-headed variety and with the help of these letters we will try to trace out the origin of the Box-headed script. Here we furnished a chart which shows the similarities of box-headed character found in Eran and Udaygiri cave inscription with the same variety of script in the records of the Vakatakas and the Sarabhapuriyas. In case of some letters from these two Gupta records we found some similarities with box-headed character of the Vakatakas and other ruling houses during the same period. The letters like, ka, ca, da, pa, ma and ha from these two Gupta records are very similar to the same letter-forms of the Vakatakas and of Sarabhapuriyas records. They are similar in character. Here a special characteristic is noticed in these two Gupta records. All these character bear solid box-head mark. According to J.F.Fleet, as the above chart shows that the character of these two Gupta inscriptions "belong to the western variety of the Gupta alphabet, and combine with a box-head variety, peculiar to central India; but there are no instances in which enough remains of the square centre of the tops of the letters to show distinctly in the lithograph" [Ibid: 242]. But whatever may be the case; with the help of comparative analysis of the letters from the above chart we can easily see that the some of the letters in these two records of the Guptas are very similar to the box-headed variety of the Vakatakas and other ruling lineages like, the Sarabhapuriyas, the Nalas, and the Panduvamsis etc. So, finally we can easily trace out the origin of 'Box-Headed' script in the two Gupta records of Samudragupta and Chandragupta II in later half of the 4th century A.D.

In conclusion we may say that the 'Box-headed' script was a new style of writing having square or sometime rectangular box at the left top of the letter, sometimes in both sides of the letter; was an artificial development of serif. It is developed mainly in eastern-central Deccan and in south. It is developed locally though the influence came from the southern class of alphabets. We cannot consider this new development as dynastic appellation; it is rather a regional variety reveals local mannerism in writing. Most importantly, at our present status of knowledge it is conceivable that, the origin of the 'box-headed script' was laid in the Eran inscription of Samudragupta and in the Udaygiri cave inscription of Chandragupta II. In their record for the first time the box-head character came into prominence in later half of the 4th century A.D. We cannot found the same box-head character neither in any other records of the Gupta's nor in their predecessors record. So it is assumed that, the box-headed character was originated in the Gupta period in the latter half of 4th century A.D. and developed up to the 7th century A.D. and after that it disappeared from the epigraphical records. Although no interest has been shown in the past as far as this script is concerned, I have however tried to pay renewed attention to this hitherto less-known script. I hope now we have adequate sources to work on the origin and development of the box-headed script.

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PLATES & MAP

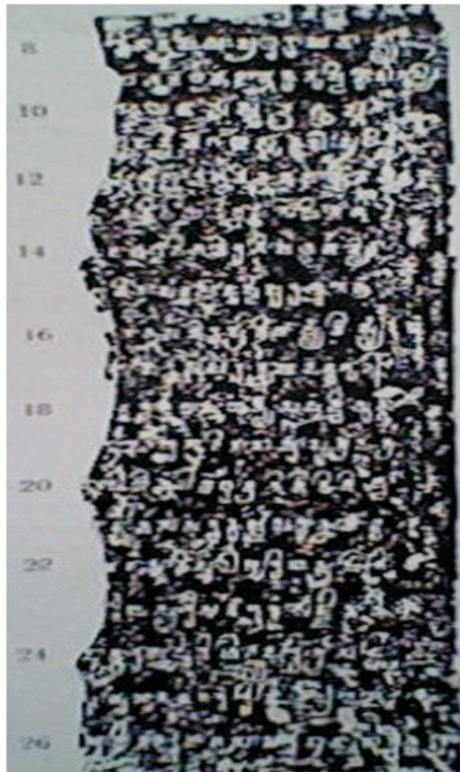


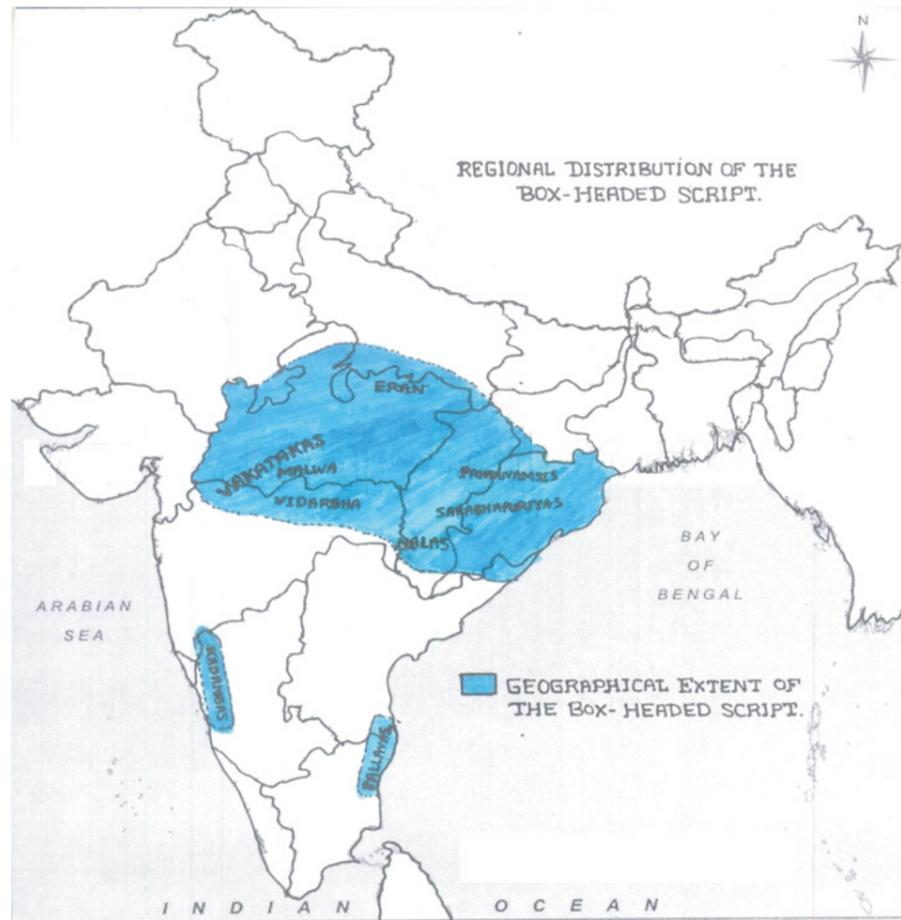
Plate No.1: ERAN STONE INSCRIPTION OF SAMUDRAGUPTA



Plate No.2: UDAYGIRI CAVE INSCRIPTION OF CHANDRAGUPTA II : THE YEAR 82

[Plates Courtesy: Fleet, J.F., Corpus Inscription Indicarum, vol-3, Inscription of Early Gupta Kings and their Successors (rev. edn.), Calcutta, 1971. pp. 221 & 242 respectively]

MAP



(Map Shows the Geographical Extent of the 'Box-Headed' Script)



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