

Literacy as a Sophisticated Craft: An Analytical Study of Writing in the Pali Canon (6th Century B.C.)

Ven. Panamure Chandima¹

Ven. Walawahengunawewe Mahindarathana²

Introduction

The evolution of human civilization is inextricably linked to the development of writing, a technology that transformed the transmission of knowledge from an ephemeral oral tradition to a permanent record. While the precise origins of the art of writing remain a subject of historical debate, modern linguistics generally accepts the premise that writing systems first emerged in Sumeria approximately 3500 years ago. However, when examining the specific context of ancient India, the historical record is often perceived as lacking clear evidence regarding the early stages of literacy. Despite this perceived gap, the Pali canonical literature offers a wealth of references that suggest the existence of a sophisticated writing system during the 6th century B.C. By examining texts such as the *Brahmajāla Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Sippa Sutta* of the *Udāna Pāli*, and various other sections of the *Aṅguttara*, *Majjhima*, *nikāyās* and *Vinaya Piṭaka*, we can begin to reconstruct the linguistic and social landscape of the period. This summary aims to expand upon these textual markers to demonstrate that writing was a recognized “*Sippa*” or craft during the time of the Buddha.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze specific factors related to the existence and functionality of a writing system in the 6th century B.C. as recorded in the Pali canonical texts. Beyond a mere historical survey, this research seeks to explore the potential for these Pali sources to illuminate modern academic disciplines, specifically History, Linguistics, and Mass Communication. Currently, much of the scholarship regarding ancient Indian literacy relies heavily on Vedic literary sources; therefore, a secondary objective is to provide a comparative perspective that highlights the unique contributions of the Pali tradition. Finally, the study aims to apply a “self-experiment system” of textual analysis to validate these findings within the internal logic of the scriptures.

1 Department of Buddhist and Pali studies, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. pchandima@busl.ac.lk

2 Department of Buddhist and Pali studies, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. revmahindarathana@busl.ac.lk

Methodology

To support the thesis that literacy was a recognized craft (sippa) in 6th century B.C. India, this study adopts a philological cross-referencing approach. Rather than relying solely on external archaeological finds, the research uses internal textual analysis of the Pali Canon, focusing on primary sources such as the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Udāna Pāli*, *Anguttara Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, and the *Vinaya Piṭaka*.

Through this method, key writing-related terms like *Lekha* (writing) and *akkhara* (letters) are tracked and compared across different literary layers, contrasting monastic rules with everyday discourses. If these terms appear consistently as part of normal social and professional life rather than as isolated anomalies, it validates that writing was an established technology during the time of the Buddha, rather than a later historical addition.

Research Problem

The central research problem lies in the apparent contradiction between the lack of archaeological evidence (such as inscriptions) from the 6th century B.C. and the frequent mentions of writing related terminology in the Pali canon. While modern linguistics points to Sumeria for the origin of writing, the internal evidence of the Pali texts suggests that writing was already an established social reality in India during the Buddha's lifetime. This leads to the critical question: Why do modern subjects like Mass Communication and Linguistics continue to depend almost exclusively on Vedic sources, and how does the exclusion of Pali data limit our understanding of ancient Indian literacy? There is a significant need to bridge the gap between canonical descriptions of "*Lekha*" (writing) and the historical timeline of Indian paleography.

Discussion

We must start the discussion of writing in 6th century B.C. India with the Pali canon. These scriptures give specific references. Key suttas like the *Brahmajāla Sutta* and the *Sippa Sutta* serve as main evidence.

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, writing is mentioned indirectly. It lists games that monks should avoid. One game is called *Akkharika*. "...akkhara-pabhā-daṇḍa-vīthi-rūpa-bīja-niddesā... akkharikā..." (*Dīgha Nikāya*, Vol. I, (2006). p. 06) In this game, people guessed letters written on a person's back or in the air. The text does not give details about the game. However, Buddhist scholars agree on its meaning. It shows that the public already knew the concept of "letters" (*Akkhara*).

Furthermore, the *Sippa Sutta* mentions different crafts or *Sippas*. “... *mudda-sippan-ti pi, gaṇanā-sippan-ti pi, saṅkhāna-sippan-ti pi, lekha-sippan-ti pi...*”. (*Udānapāli*, (1982). p31) It classifies writing as a noble and useful skill. The *Mahavagga Pālī* is part of the Vinaya, which is about monastic discipline. It contains even more direct references. It discusses writing (*Lekha*) as a regular job. “...*lekha-kammanta...*”. (Vinaya Piṭaka, Vol. I, (1997). p. 77) It also notes that this job could cause physical problems like finger pain. This shows that writing was a common and tiring activity.

These Pali references are very important. They provide a balance to the Vedic sources. Vedic sources usually dominate modern history and language studies. In the field of Mass Communication, Pali texts offer a unique view. They show how people categorized and spread information.

The Vedic tradition was strictly spoken and memorized. The Pali tradition was also mostly spoken for several centuries. However, the Pali texts prove that written communication existed as a known technology at that time. This suggests that the 6th century B.C. was a period of “literary transition.” Spoken and written systems existed together.

From a linguistic view, other texts are also important. The *Sālha Sutta* and the *Sela Sutta* (*Sutta Nipāta* (1982) p102–113) mention writing. This suggests that people had grammatical and structural awareness. This awareness is necessary for a writing system. Modern linguistics can learn from the Pali canon. It shows how the texts separate the spoken word from the written record. This is true even though no physical objects from that era survived.

The methodology uses a “self-experiment system.” This system involves strict internal cross-referencing of these suttas. This process ensures that the mentions of writing are not later additions. Instead, it proves that writing was deeply a part of society during the Buddha’s era.

Results and Conclusion

I. In conclusion, the Pali canonical literature serves as a vital historical repository that challenges the notion of a late development of writing in ancient India. While external linguistic theories often trace the roots of writing back to Sumeria, the internal evidence of the Pali suttas provides a compelling argument for the existence of a writing system as early as the 6th century B.C. The presence of terms related to writing in foundational texts like the *Brahmajāla Sutta* suggests that literacy was not merely a royal or elite tool but was integrated into the social and recreational life of the people.

II. The objectives of this research have highlighted the necessity of looking beyond Vedic sources when studying the history of Indian communication. By focusing on the Pali texts, we uncover a tradition that views writing as a “*Sippa*” or a practical craft, one that held a distinct place alongside other professional skills of the era. This broader perspective is essential for a holistic understanding of how ancient societies managed and preserved information before the widespread use of permanent inscriptions.

III. The research problem addressed here the reliance of modern subjects like History and Linguistics on a limited set of sources is mitigated by the inclusion of the Pali data. The sources indicate that modern subjects such as Mass Communication can be significantly enriched by acknowledging the communicative strategies recorded in the *Dhammapada* and the *Majjhima Nikāya*. These texts provide evidence of a culture that was acutely aware of the power of the written word, even while maintaining a strong oral tradition.

IV. The discussion of various suttas has demonstrated that writing was not an isolated phenomenon but was woven into the fabric of monastic and lay life. Whether through the warnings against certain games in the *Vinaya* or the praise of skills in the *Udāna*, the Pali canon consistently acknowledges the presence of “*Lekha*”. This consistency across different sections of the *Tipiṭaka* reinforces the validity of the claims regarding 6th century literacy, providing a robust framework for further historical inquiry.

V. Ultimately, the application of a “self-experiment system” to these scriptures allows for a more nuanced interpretation of ancient literacy. By analyzing the particulars of the Pali texts, we can conclude that the 6th century B.C. was a period of significant intellectual and technological activity. While we may still lack the physical manuscripts from this distant past, the literary “fingerprints” left behind in the Pali canon provide undeniable evidence of a flourishing writing culture that continues to inform modern scholarship in History and Linguistics today.

Keywords – Writing System, Art, Craft, Suttas, Buddha’s time

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