

## **Kaithi : The Lost Script**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper attempts to throw light on the history of the almost extinct but once widespread script of Kaithi. Originating in north India and becoming popular in north and central parts of the country, the script was once widely used in order to maintain a variety of records, and was popularly taught in schools. However, it was systematically removed from, and subsequently lost in popular literary culture by the twentieth century.*

**Keywords:** *Kaithi, Kayasthas, Brahmi script, Devanagari, Kutil.*

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Kaithi, variously termed as Kayathi or Kayasthi is a Brahmi script which was prevalent in northern and eastern India, in present day Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh as well as some parts of Madhya Pradesh. This script was also used in areas where diaspora communities from these regions were settled like Trinidad and Mauritius. It is often claimed to be a Bihari script despite its use and influence extending beyond the state of Bihar.<sup>1</sup> Some historians trace its origins back to the post-Gupta period<sup>2</sup>. This script was used to write Awadhi<sup>3</sup>, Bhojpuri<sup>4</sup>, Magahi<sup>5</sup>, Maithili<sup>6</sup>, Angika<sup>7</sup>, Bajjika<sup>8</sup>, Hindustani, apart from some regional versions of Bengali and Urdu.

The script derives its name from the Sanskrit word 'Kayastha', a term used to denote the scribal caste in northern regions of India who were mainly involved in maintenance of administrative and land records. It is believed that the Kayasthas came up with this script in order to facilitate their official record keeping. Thus, kayasthi, meaning "of the scribes", or colloquially, kayathi, or simply, kaithi.<sup>9</sup>

Although it is commonly believed that Kaithi was derived from the Devanagari script, few scholars argue that both these scripts emerged alongside each other. Grierson stated that

Devanagari was "too cumbrous for the common affairs of life" as it was not "sufficiently cursive" and thus the pen had to be lifted several times while writing a word. Thus came up the script of Kaithi. It discarded as much as possible the horizontal and perpendicular lines, leaving<sup>2</sup> c. 550 AD to 647 AD.

only the essential part of the letter, and as much of the rest as could be combined by one stroke of the pen without materially altering the shape of the original.

Nevertheless, Kaithi is a cursive script that is easy to learn and use, and does not focus much on grammatical errors; as a consequence, Kaithi was a script which gave less privileged or marginalised groups, and also some, access to writing and reading.<sup>13</sup>

Most scholars agree upon the fact that the script had three distinguishable versions: one that was used to write Bhojpuri, the other which was used for writing Maithili, and a third one for Magahi. The Magahi style was adopted for official purposes in the state of Bihar<sup>14</sup>. Some

scholars also distinguish Kaithi according to regional differences. According to this distinction, it may roughly be divided into three classes, Tirhuti, which is said to be the most elegant, Bhojpuri (of Saran and Shahabad) which is said to be the most legible, and the Magah (or that of Patna

and Gaya) which is a mean between the two.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that a major loophole in the popular use of the Kaithi script was that there were no gaps between words and it was the task of the reader to divide the words in order to frame sentences, leading to serious issues of interpretation. However, the form of Kaithi that was used in official records did have the system of writing separate words.

Kaithi is a major historic script in which substantial collections of legal records, administrative accounts, census schedules, folk texts, pedagogical materials, and private letters were written and printed; hence, Kaithi was recognized as a distinct script by the British colonial authority<sup>16</sup>.

According to Prof. Alok Rai, the script can be seen in historical records and archives and was widely in use amongst common people and taught in schools until the late nineteenth century. Many missionary societies also used the script for printing the Bible for propagation of the gospel.

Official records, such as the Report on Indigenous Education and Vernacular Schools, provide some statistics on the use of Kaithi in education. An edition of this report from 1854 shows that 77,368 primers were printed in the “Kayasthi alphabet”, while 25,151 were printed in the

“Nagari alphabet” in the North-Western Provinces & Oudh<sup>17</sup>. Schools in which the Kaithi script was the medium “outnumbered those in which the Nagari character was in use”.

Post the issuing of the Charles Wood Education Dispatch in 1854, there was an attempt to make place for vernacular education within the education system in order to produce efficient workers for the colonial administration. This led to a linguistic tussle between Urdu and Hindi for becoming eligible to be used in administrative documents. Subsequently there was widespread lobbying in favour of the unanimous adoption of the Devanagari script in order to achieve linguistic unification, which was acknowledged by the government in 1893. This signalled the first step towards decline in the popularity of the Kaithi script. The Nagari Pracharini Sabha,

established on 16th July, 1893, was at the the forefront of lobbying for the promotion of Devanagari script. Although it is important to note that the government had briefly reversed this decision in 1897 due to lack of employees who were proficient in Devanagari script.

George Grierson, the linguist largely responsible for the Linguistic Survey of India carried out between 1894 and 1928, notes in his 1899 Handbook to the Kaithi Character that in some places Kaithi writing was associated with the lower classes, for whom education in Devanagari was

considered an unnecessary luxury<sup>18</sup>. His language policy was the main reason behind adoption of Kaithi by the courts of Bihar in 1880. Sir Ashley Eden ordered the exclusive use of Kaithi or

Devanagari in Bihar, which was at that time still a region of the Bengal administration<sup>19</sup>.

Meanwhile other parts of the Indian subcontinent where the script used to be popular, switched to Devanagari as a response to socio-political conditions since c.1893. This is why the Kaithi script is sometimes exclusively associated with the state of Bihar.

Kaithi continued to have a strong foothold in the Bihar region. In 1881, textbooks in the standardized Kaithi script had already appeared in primary and middle vernacular schools of this region and were initiated for the use in scribal examinations<sup>20</sup>. The schools and courts of Bihar continued to use the script until at least 1913.

Elsewhere in India, the Devanagari script was successful in establishing itself at the political and social levels, and thereby showed that it could possibly replace Kaithi<sup>21</sup>. Subsequently,

Kaithi was systematically marginalised from the official sphere. By the mid 20th century, even in Bihar, Devanagari began to be used along with Kaithi, and gradually overpowered its stronghold.

This exclusion and extinction of Kaithi not only crippled many people linguistically but rendered them illiterate on paper<sup>22</sup>. A few decades later, people from the Kayasth community

also shifted their focus away from Kaithi in order to enter government employment. As a result, the understanding of this script was almost completely lost, and its heritage was forgotten.

In conclusion, a script which had for centuries facilitated the writing of records and administrative documents in a vast area of the Indian subcontinent, lost its importance in the face of complex socio political scenarios and ultimately dwindled away from popular memory.