

A Unique alphabet with 58 letters

Posted on



Children begin to learn how to read at a very young age with the guidance of Buddhist monks (Photographs Sarath Perera)

Amma ('A' as in 'up') in Sinhala (and also in Tamil), the language of the majority of Sri Lankans—the Sinhalese—means 'mother'. It's the first word that any infant would say, naturally— because the infant gets used to calling the mother.

Words D C Ranatunga

අ is the first letter in the Sinhala alphabet. It represents 'A/a' in English. Just as much as the little one starts calling for the mother, in writing the first letters, the child is taught to write අම්මා (Amma – Mother) starting with the letter අ.

Sinhala as a language has a cherished history of two and a half millennia. A continuous record of two thousand three hundred years can be counted for writing by the Sinhalese.

Learning the alphabet starts at a very early age. As a child starts to talk, the parents look for an auspicious time to read the first letters. It is the common belief that unless this tradition is followed, the child may not be able to study well. The child's horoscope is taken to an astrologer who will go through it and do the necessary calculations and arrive at a good time.

The village Buddhist temple has been the seat of learning long before schools were established during the British colonial era in the 19th Century. The Buddhist monks were the most learned in the village and the chief monk gave leadership to the village in all matters. Being the most learned person, he was considered most suitable to read and write the first letters.

On the auspicious day the parents would take the child to the temple, flowers will be offered and Buddhist stanzas recited at the image house prior to meeting the monk at his quarters with the child. As the auspicious time approaches, the parents and the child will offer betel leaves and worship the monk who will select a book and make friends with the child, coaxing him to read a few letters with the monk giving the lead. Often this becomes a fairly tedious process with the child refusing to read.

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Once the reading was over, it was time to write the first letters of the alphabet.

Writing was done on trays of sand. The most outstanding Sri Lankan literary figure of the 20th Century, Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976) recalls his early days when he learnt the alphabet. “I feel an eager curiosity to look back into the past stirring in me when I recall how I used to write, my forefinger pressing my middle finger on the sand board... a board painted black and its surface covered with a thick layer of sea sand. As the fingers traced the Sinhalese letter upon it, the smooth sand parted exposing the black board as curving black lines of letters. To a man who looked at them from a distance, they appeared like letters written in charcoal on a white board... My hand was first disciplined at the sand board, before I graduated to the copy book and the quill pen,” (from the novel: ‘Lay Bare the Roots’).

Sinhala is unique to the Sinhalese and has its own script based on an alphabet with 58 letters, making it one of the largest alphabets in the world. Not all letters are in common use though. According to renowned linguist, Professor J B Disanayaka, 38 letters are used to write contemporary Sinhala. Of them, 12 are vowel-letters and 26, consonant-letters. In the use of vowel sounds there is a further division—vowel-letters and vowel-strokes. While the former are used to write vowel-sounds that occur at the beginning of a word, the latter are used when vowel-sounds occur in another place in a word, say, after a consonant-sound.

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Let’s have a look at the vowel sounds of the Sinhala alphabet. Of the 12 vowel-letters අ (a) has four variations: අ (pronounced as in ‘Up’) අ (pronounced as in ‘Ask’), අ (as in ‘Amber’) and අ (as in ‘Ash’). The other vowels are අ (as in ‘India’), අ (as in East), අ (as in ‘Uganda’), අ (as in ‘Ooze’), අ (as in ‘End’), අ (as in ‘Ancient’), අ (as in ‘Odd’) and අ (as in ‘Own’).

The set of consonants are not found in any other language in the world, says Professor Disanayaka. The only exception is ‘Divehi’, the language of the Maldives, which is an offshoot of Sinhala.

Historical records indicate that people speaking an Indo-Aryan dialect migrated to Sri Lanka from North India about five centuries before the beginning of the Christian Era.

The origin of the Sinhala alphabet dates back to several centuries—at least to the time that Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the Third Century BC. The

Sinhala script traces its origins to ‘Brahmi’ like all other Indo-Aryan scripts. However, distinguished Sri Lankan archaeologist, Professor Senerat Paranavitana noted differences between the Indian Brahmi script and what was used in Sri Lanka. He refers to the many hundreds of caves with inscriptions engraved on their brows, found in various parts of the Island. The script of these records is the same as that of the inscriptions in India in the edicts of Emperor Asoka. Though the script is different to what is in the present alphabet, Professor Paranavitana has converted and identified the letters and comparing them to the sounds in the present alphabet.

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Over time, the original script changed. The present letters of the Sinhala alphabet have more curves closer to Telugu and Malayalam, two Dravidian languages in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala respectively. It has been described as “a unique cursive script.”

Evolving through time the Sinhala language has nurtured much, incorporating new words though the written script has stayed the same. As such we step forward with a ‘unique’ language that combines both the old and the new to preserve the age old and unfolding beauty of Sinhala.

