CHAPTER 1

THE POWER OF WRITING

*Language exerts hidden power, like the moon on the tides.*

Rita Mae Brown, American writer

*Writing* – the term conjures up images from the long forgotten past: a stonecutter painstakingly and faithfully reproducing on rock the inscriptions encrypted by a scribe, the meaning of which may have been beyond the comprehension of the former; the cuneiform script of the Chaldean clay tablets narrating the story of the Flood, written with a square pointed stylus, which may have later inspired the writers of the *Bible* to mention the great flood in the *Book of Genesis*; the wisdom of the papyrus books, to write on which the Egyptians used reed pens, made from the stalks of grasses, or bamboo and cane, and dating back to the building of the Great Pyramid; the bamboo fibre tablets painted with Indian ink used by the early Chinese to record their religious symbolism, and the stories of their royal dynasties; and the dressed skins and prepared palm leaves on which the great Indian sages wrote the *Vedas* and the Buddhist *Pitakas* – an endless array of images which traversing through quill pens and parchment leads to the word processor and printer paper. Conversely, the term may also evoke the weightiness of the judgment recorded by a judge at the end of a trial; the seriousness of the findings of a doctor’s diagnosis; the importance of the results of a scientific research; the speculations of a philosophical treatise; the connotations of the words of a writer – again an infinite number of possibilities are posited to the mind. There are two things in common in these lines of thought – language and an arbitrarily decided upon set of symbols to set it down, i.e. a script.
Language is, undoubtedly, mankind’s finest invention to date. But language is very often taken too much for granted, that it is not even considered an invention. It has been, it is, it will be, almost as naturally as the blood which flows in our veins – this seems to be the view adopted by most people on language. The invention of the wheel has been hailed groundbreaking; however had it not been for the invention of language it is doubtful whether the invention of the wheel would have succeeded in hastening man’s progress. It would no doubt have been taxing for the inventor/inventors of the wheel to explain to his/their peers how he/they made it and what it was for without the aid of language. Progress, in the days of yore, just as it is now, would have been impossible if everyone kept their ideas to themselves, and even more so if there was no language to express one’s ideas in.

But the uniqueness of human language does not lie in the fact that it helps us to communicate, or that it can be learned, says eminent psychologists. Rather, it has three special features which merit our deliberate consideration. One, it consists of many elements which can be combined in many different ways; two, it has a grammar which makes clear the rules for these combinations; and three, there exists a complex relationship between the words and the real world, a relationship which is called meaning (McKeachie 325). Even while all this is said, we are still in the dark as to how mankind came to possess the capacity for language and how mankind invented language.

There are two main hypotheses relating to how mankind came to acquire the capacity for language, neither of which can be proved or disproved. The first is that language is the gift of God to humans. In Genesis 2:20, Adam, the first man is portrayed as giving names to all the living creatures: God created man with not only the innate capacity for language, but also in possession of a language. The second, known as the Natural Evolution hypothesis, suggests that
at some stage in evolution, mankind developed a more sophisticated brain which made language invention and learning the inevitable outcome.

While we may speculate on how mankind made the transition from a non-linguistic to linguistic mode of communication, we cannot but agree with the philosopher S.K. Langer who states that this “whole day of creation” or “whole chapter in evolution” is forever beyond our comprehension (83). This is because, till the invention of writing, there was no means whereby man could leave future generations any information about his speech. Psychologists have put forward two theories on the development of language, drawn from their observation of human learning. Both these theories are founded on the assumption that the only requirement for the development of a new language is the “isolation of a group of individuals with no ready-made means of communication” (Munn 436). The first of these theories, proposed by C.H. Judd, draws upon a very common observation. Children have a predilection for inventing their own verbal expressions for the objects they see around them, and continually use these expressions to represent these objects. Judd goes on to say that

When the world was young, the opportunity for inventing new words must have been unlimited. Even in that far-away age, however, the inventor’s task was less than half accomplished when he emitted the new sound. Before he could regard his task as complete, he must induce his neighbours to use the sound as he had used it.

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The second theory, which was proposed by E.L. Thorndike, lays stress on the random associations between babbling sounds and objects seen at the same time. In Thorndike’s words,

Consider a child of early man playing with a large shell. Let us take the state of affairs least favourable to connecting the sound ‘ug’ with that shell….Let his
prattling possibilities consist of a thousand syllables all equally likely to occur in any one situation or in any other. Then the chance that he will utter ‘ug’ as he puts a pebble in the shell is 1 in 1000 if he prattles at all. (Munn 436)

If the child utters the ‘ug’ sound once, it will need further reinforcement. Thorndike points out that there are forces which will lead to such progress – the enjoyment the child derives from putting pebbles into the shell will make him repeat the action, and this in turn will create the mental set which will evoke the vocal response ‘ug’, thereby making him utter ‘ug’ again. Consequently, the connection between the object and the sound is strengthened.

Howsoever we may decide upon this naming process, there still remains the question put forward by Judd, as to how the sounds gained acceptance in the social group. Psychologists are of the opinion that prestige could have played a determining role in this. Even today, the masses are seen to adopt the mannerisms and usages of people who have prestige. The same could have happened in the primitive societies. Once this process was set in motion, mankind would have been in a constant search for novel utterances to represent the different aspects of his world (Munn 436 – 437).

The theories proposed by linguists for the origin of languages have also, to a certain extent, developed from a similar perspective. Otto Jespersen, the Danish linguist, in his Language Its Nature, Development and Origin, has dwelt at length on the origin of speech. He makes mention of the various theories in circulation regarding language origin, applying his critical insight to the four main theories, and adding a theory of his own (413 – 416).

(1) The ‘bow-wow’ theory – speech originated when man started imitating animal sounds, i.e. primitive man copied the barking of a dog, and thereby coined a word which suggested either the animal ‘dog’ or its sound ‘bark’. The onomatopoeic words prevalent
were cited as proof of this theory; further, this method has not become completely extinct so far. However, languages have been found to vary quite a lot in the way they represent these natural sounds, that this theory failed to gather support.

(2) The ‘pooh-pooh’ theory – speech originated from the instinctive sounds produced by man in response to emotions like disgust, anger or pain. While the use of sounds as interjections was cited as evidence, it failed as they make up only a minority of the language, and further, other noises produced as responses to emotions do not have a corresponding phonological pattern.

(3) The ‘ding-dong’ theory – which was propounded by Max Muller, states that language is the result of man’s instinctual response to natural stimuli. This resulted in sounds which were synchronous with the environment, thereby leading to the development of language. It was observed that the sounds used for certain words were more or less the same across the world, but it failed to give a convincing answer to the question.

(4) The ‘yo-he-ho’ theory – coined by Noire, the fourth theory, nicknamed ‘yo-he-ho’, Jespersen states is that “under any strong muscular effort it is a relief to the system to let breath come out strongly and repeatedly, and by that process to let the vocal chords vibrate in different ways; when primitive acts were performed in common, they would, therefore, naturally be accompanied with some sounds which would come to be associated with the idea of the act performed and stand as a name for it…” (442). Thus, as man went about his community life, combined physical labor produced communal sounds, which in time evolved into chants, and then into language. While this may account for the rhythmic feature of language, there is a significant gap between this kind of expression and what comprises language.
(5) The ‘la-la’ theory – The fifth theory, which has been put forward by Jespersen himself, is nicknamed the ‘la-la’ theory. In Jespersen’s own words,

Man sang out their feelings long before they were able to speak their thoughts….When we say that speech originated in song, what we mean is merely that our comparatively monotonous spoken language and our highly developed vocal music are differentiations of primitive utterances, which had more in them of the latter than of the former. These utterances were at first, like the singing of birds and the roaring of many animals and the crying and crooning of babies, exclamative, not communicative – that is, they came forth from an inner craving of the individual without any thought of any fellow creatures. Our remote ancestors had not the slightest notion that such a thing as communicating ideas and feelings to someone else was possible. They little suspected that in singing as nature prompted them they were paving the way for a language capable of rendering minute shades of thought. (436 – 437)

This theory, David Crystal points out, failed to account for “the gap between the emotional and rational aspects of speech” (The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language 291).

Charles Darwin propounded the ‘ta – ta’ hypothesis, which suggests that speech may have its origin in the imitation of hand gestures. The organs of speech began to imitate the hand gestures, and from there developed human language. However, Darwin himself was skeptical about his hypothesis.

Language origin could also have been brought on by necessity, as already suggested by the ‘yo-he-ho’ theory, and reiterated in the ‘warning hypothesis’ and the ‘lying hypothesis’. The
‘warning hypothesis’ suggests that language may have developed from warnings issued to tribesmen by their mates when encountered by wild animals. The ‘lying hypothesis’ formulated by the linguist E.H. Sturtevant claims that all real or true intentions or emotions are involuntarily expressed by gesture, look or sound, and hence voluntary communication using language would have been invented for lying or deceiving (Vajda).

The incongruity and chaos created by these competing theories was evidenced when the Royal Linguistic Society of Paris banned all discussion on the origin of language in 1866, on the grounds that the theories lacked scientific basis. The imitation theories would serve to explain isolated words of the language, but most of the words in any language are symbols, and have an arbitrary relationship with the meaning. Likewise, the necessity hypotheses may account for certain words which were to begin with sounds made out of need, but it would not satisfactorily explain the unique feature of language called grammar – which is structurally significant, but meaning-wise void.

Another important point of discussion in the study of languages is the hypotheses regarding language diversity. Linguists have been plagued by the question whether there was only one original language or more; and thence, was there more than one invention of language. One of the oldest beliefs on this, monogenesis, has been that there was a single original language. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, divine wrath led to the confusing babble of various tongues, as described in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. A similar story has also been found in the Toltec mythology of pre-Columbian Mexico, wherein an angry God disperses the builders of a great pyramid at Cholula. There are other stories with parallel ideas across various cultures. But it is a difficult task to reach agreement as to which language is the original (Vajda).
While monogenesis may seem to be primarily a religious belief, a considerably large number of scholars support a correlate of monogenesis, the Mother Tongue Theory. This theory states that there was only one single original language spoken by human beings about 150 thousand years ago, and all languages known to man today trace their origins to this mother language.

Another hypothesis, polygenesis, makes the claim that as humans evolved in more than one location at the same time, each group devised their own language. Each of these original languages in time diverged into numerous forms.

These theories, with their inconsistencies and resultant criticism serve to highlight the fact that mankind is still in the dark with regard to the origin of language. Standing at a stage where language, its use and its study have gone on for centuries, it is impossible for anyone to imagine a situation where language did not exist, and working backwards from there, trace its origins. A fairly certain conjecture with regard to the origin of language that may be made, is that it was primarily restricted to speech. Writing evolved much later in the history of civilization.

Speculating on the different causes and conditions which led to the origin of writing has proven to be an equally fascinating exercise. The psychologist N.L. Munn, in his *Evolution and Growth of Human Behaviour*, states that the special virtue of writing is that “…it makes possible the transmission of cultural acquisitions in a manner much more extensive and permanent than that rendered possible by either gestures or vocalizations, which depend, of course, upon personal contacts…” (344). Based on our own experience with writing, and our assumptions about our ancestors who developed the written mode of communication, three possible causes suggest themselves.
One is that there were things which were too important to be forgotten, and hence needed to be preserved in some form. Two that people, who were separated in space, and time, needed a medium to communicate. And three, it was imperative to label one’s property – whether it be cattle, tools or utensils, in some distinctive manner to avoid confusion. It would not be wrong to assume that the beginnings of writing were utilitarian, but in due course of time, writing came to be employed to record prayers and war-songs. It has also been conjectured that very few of our ancient ancestors knew how to write or to read what was written, there was an elite group which knew; the general public did not possesses this knowledge. But just as languages evolved, writing also evolved.

Historically, writing evolved not as the representation of speech but as a means of visual communication independent of language. Messages in pictures or knotted cords carried no implication of utterance and could not be read aloud. Gradually this visual method of communication became linked to language; the symbols came to be attached to items in the language, which now replaced their original non-linguistic referents. Once this had happened, the symbols had become a script. A script is a system of visual communication whose symbols stand for items in a language. All scripts can therefore be read aloud, and anything that cannot be read aloud is not a script (Halliday 48).

Modern scholarship traces the origin of writing to three places: Mesopotamia, China and Mesoamerica (Bazerman 8). Writing in Mesopotamia had its main function in the sphere of economics. The Mesopotamian civilization relied on a 4000 year old counting system using clay counters, tokens, for its economic purposes. As need to keep records of transactions arose, these three dimensional tokens came to be replaced by their imprints on clay tablets around 3200 BC.
In due course, imprinting with the token was replaced by tracing with a stylus, and more importantly, signs for numerals and signs for goods evolved separately.

The creation of phonograms, i.e. signs standing for sounds, was the next step in the evolution of the writing system. This leap occurred in Sumeria in 3000 BC, again necessitated by economic concerns – this time, to record the names of the people who gave or received the goods imprinted on the clay tablets. Signs were designed by choosing things which were easy to draw, and which would represent the sound of the word they bring to mind.

The function of writing continued exclusively in the domain of economics and accounting for another 400 years, and then it found a new purpose – this time, funerary. A scribe in the royal court of Ur inscribed the personal name and title of royalty on gold, silver and lapis lazuli objects which were to be deposited in the tombs. The Sumerians held the belief that the name of the deceased had to be uttered at regular intervals to aid the existence of the ghost in the underworld. Apparently, the funerary texts now came to take over this function. In due course, prayers for a long afterlife, and victories in battle appeared as inscriptions. By 2000 BC, writing came to be used for literary, scholarly, historical and religious purposes (Bazerman 9 – 13).

The cuneiform script evolved about 2200 to 2000 BC. The wedge patterns, which remained partly logographic, gradually came to represent more and more syllables, but not individual sounds. This script has played a great role in the spread of writing, and was adapted by various language families including Semitic, Dravidian, and Indo-European. The cuneiform script lost its supremacy after the rise of the Aramic script, which could be written with a flowing hand on parchment or papyrus. However cuneiform is said to have existed in Mesopotamia until the Christian era (Bazerman 15).
The alphabet was invented about 1700 BC in the Near East, identified with the present-day Lebanon. It was a totally unique system, which drew nothing from the cuneiform, and had a specific sign for each speech sound. The first alphabet contained only 22 letters, and the comparative ease with which this could be mastered as opposed to the cuneiform with its 600 odd signs, led to the spread of literacy. It must be noted that, the letters of the first alphabet, represented only consonants (Bazerman 15).

Phoenicians have been credited with transporting the alphabet to Greece, where with the addition of letters for the vowels, the 27 letter alphabet promoted ease of use of the written script. Shortly, this script was adopted and modified by the Etruscans, who occupied the Tuscany province of Italy. With the Roman conquest of Etruria in the first century BC, the alphabet came into the hands of the Romans. Rome’s conquests led to the spread of the Latin alphabet throughout Europe.

The second origin of writing is in China, wherein writing has an unbroken record of use in the last three millennia, with the earliest evidence for the existence of a written script dating back to 1250 BC. The Chinese script from the beginning was written vertically, with the columns read right to left. The written language developed through many variants of the script – namely, the ta chuan, or the “great seal” script (1200 – 800 BC), the hsiao chuan, or the “lesser seal” script (221 – 206 BC), the li shu, or the “clerky” script (206 BC – 220 AD), and the kai shu, the formal style standard script developed in the second century AD (Bazerman 16).

The most intriguing feature of the Chinese script is that up to the early 20th century, all the dialects of the language were written in a literary dialect that dates back to 1100 BC to 100 AD. The educated Chinese thus wrote in a way they themselves never spoke, which can be attributed to the Chinese civil service’s power in creating and maintaining the written standard.
In the early 20th century, reforms were underway, and writing is now done in Modern Standard Chinese, which is a dialect similar to Mandarin used in Beijing (Bazerman 16).

The Chinese script is also unique in the size of its character set – which is about 60,000. However, a literate Chinese can manage fairly well even if he/she possesses only a fraction of this. The Western world has, for long, nursed the misconception that the Chinese characters are small pictures which depict ideas, but this is not so. The characters represent speech sounds, and about 90% of them have a graphic element that indicates the pronunciation, which combines with another element that denotes the meaning (Bazerman 16).

The third origin, the Mesoamerican lineage in writing has been most visible in the Mayan script – which dates from 250 to 900 AD through to the 16th century. However, the oldest Mesoamerican writings are said to date as early as 1100 BC. With renewed interest and fascination in the Mayan civilization rearing its head in the last two to three decades, the Mayan script has also been in the spotlight with painstaking efforts on to decipher it.

The Mayan script consists of characters known as glyphs, which are known to number up to 800. The glyphs represent morphemes, syllables, as well as the semantic and phonological determinatives. The strange feature is that there is no set standard for the construction of a glyph, hence the same word may be represented differently even in the same text. The glyphs were written in paired vertical stacks and read top to bottom, left to right in a zig zag fashion. These glyphs were carved on upright stones known as stelae, painted on ceramics and codices made of bark paper. Mesoamerican writing seems to have been mainly used to record the actions of kingly dynasties and to do calendrical calculations (Bazerman 17).

Other Mesoamerican scripts dating back to 650 BC have been discovered in the states of Tabasco and Oaxaca, Mexico. Researchers have suggested that from 400 BC to 200 BC three
related writing systems – the Isthmian script, the Oaxacan script and the Mayan script were in use in Mesoamerica (Bazerman 17).

With the growth and spread of civilizations across the world, there evolved various other scripts as well. One which merits attention at this stage of the discussion is the origin of the Indian script. Though it has no direct bearing on the topic on hand, it provides a significant backdrop for understanding the growth of the civilization and its literacy, as the art of writing is undeniably linked to a nation’s educational heritage as well. The latter being the key reference point for this research.

Subhash Kak, in his scholarly paper titled, *The Evolution of Early Writing in India* states that in the south Asian peninsular region, the Indu-Sarasvati cultural tradition, which can be traced back to 7000 BC, marked the beginning of the Indian civilization. Out of the more than 2500 settlements of this tradition, two-thirds were along the Sarasvati river, and the remaining were in present-day Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. Though nomenclature termed it the Indus valley civilization, recent studies have suggested that the Indus region was merely the periphery of this tradition, which was mainly focused in the valleys of the Sarasvati. As maybe expected, agriculture and animal husbandry were the mainstays of the civilization.

Historians now classify the cultural evolution of the civilization into four broad eras: (1) the early era (6500-5000 BC), which was characterized by the absence of ceramics; (2) the regionalization era (5000-2600 BC), which was characterized by the regional development of distinct artifact styles; (3) the integration era (2600-1900 BC), also known as the Harappan era, which was characterized by the development of urban centers; and (4) the localization era (1900-1300 BC), which witnessed a blending of the patterns from the integration era with the regional ceramic styles.
The agriculture patterns of rabi (winter sown, spring harvested) and kharif (summer sown, fall harvested) were apparently developed during the sixth millennium and the early second millennium BC, by these early agriculturists. Buildings were made of mud bricks, red bricks, stone and wood. Mass production of pottery using wheels and moulds were practiced. The civilization also had long distance trade as is evidenced by archaeological discoveries of turquoise from central Asia, lapis lazuli from northern Afghanistan, and shells from the coast of the Arabian Sea in the excavation sites. The Indus-Sarasvati cultural tradition, Kak points out, consisted of overlapping cultural styles and therefore most probably corresponds to different ethnic groups.

The richest period in the evolution of the tradition is considered to be the integration era or the Harappan era. The tradition at this point of time stretched from the Himalayas in the north to the Tapti river in the south, and from the Indus river valleys in the west to the plains of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers in the east.

In this first urban phase of the Indian civilization, there was a written script in use, which came to be known as the Indus writing. The extant written records from this period are carvings on seals, pieces of soft stone and copper tablets. While a total of 4200 such inscribed objects have been uncovered by archaeologists, many are duplicates. Including numerals, and conjuncts of more basic signs, a total of 400 different signs seem to have been employed in the inscriptions.

Interestingly, most inscriptions are short, averaging only 5 signs. There is however, one long text on a three-sided amulet, which is 26 signs long. The longest inscription on a single side, Kak notes, is on a seal, which has 17 signs in three lines.
Conjectures on the purpose of the seals have led to the conclusion that they could have been used to mark ownership, and the copper tablets may have been amulets. Seal impressions on clay could have been tags attached to bales of goods. There were pictorial motifs often depicting animals, and geometrical designs including the swastika to go along with the writing as well.

Further discoveries suggest the possession of an accurate weighing system, ranging from tiny weights to huge ones which most probably required to be hoisted by ropes. As already mentioned, the civilization had long-distance trade, which is confirmed by archaeological discoveries in the Persian Gulf. Kak suggests that the products thus traded could have been pottery, jewellery, copper and bronze vessels and woven cotton goods, and the scope of the trade would have necessitated meticulous calculations and accounting.

Following the collapse of the Harappan urban phase around 1900 BC, the civilization started moving east and south: this relocation also finds mention in Vedic literature. The civilization continued in a state of decline until 900 BC, when there arose a second urbanization in the Ganga-Jamuna valley. The extant records of this period are in the Brahmi script, which grammarians find to be a systematic one, which must have evolved from the earlier Indus script. Kak explains the complex system, carefully pointing out that Brahmi and the Sarasvati/Indus scripts had much in common, which gradually led to development of the Nagari script of later Indian languages,

Each letter in Brahmi represents a consonant combined with a. Combinations with other vowels are represented by the use of distinctive marks which modify the basic sign. Two consonants together were expressed by placing the signs for the two, one on top of another. This process of combinations makes the total number of
distinctive Brahmi signs to be 330 for the 33 consonants alone, without considering the conjuncts. … Based on morphological considerations, the Brahmi signs can be divided into two groups: the 16 primary signs, and the secondary or the derived signs. Many of the Brahmi signs are the first syllables of familiar objects: thus \( g, ch, m, s', h \) appear to have been derived from the representations of giri (hill), chatra (umbrella), matsya (sh), sara (arrow), and hasta (hand).

An analysis of Sarasvati and Brahmi reveals connections between the two scripts that cannot be explained as arising out of chance. One sees that the most frequent letters of Sarasvati and Brahmi look almost identical and besides they are in the same order of frequency. One does encounter a change in the orientation of the signs. But such modification can also be seen in the evolution of Brahmi to the later Nagari, where many signs have been turned sideways or upside-down. (6-7)

As mentioned earlier, the Vedic literature has recorded the shift of the civilization from the Harappan urban phase to the east and south. The society, it is mentioned therein, was partly urban and partly agricultural and pastoral during this time. In the Brahmanas, which are appendices to the Vedas, there is a description of an expansion into the eastern region which was dense forest land. Kak states that the Vedic people were literate, and indications of this are present in the Vedas themselves. He refers to the Aitareya Aranyaka, which has clear pointers on how a pupil should do his writing; and to the description of different aspects of the alphabet mentioned in the Upanishads to validate this observation.

The third script which came into prominence in the growth of the Indian civilization was the Kharosthi, which was prevalent during the Mauryan period. It was used in Northwest India
and Central Asia, and is believed to have been derived from the Aramaic script. It was heavily influenced by the Brahmi script, and adapted itself to the Indo-Aryan sound system. It shared common features with Aramaic, including being written from right to left.

What needs to be borne in mind with regard to the Indian scripts is that the Indus script has not been completely deciphered to this date, and hence has not been able to provide a picture of the life, customs and beliefs of the period. Historians and archaeologists have had to make do with conjectures. However, archaeologists have been known to have stated that this script outweighed the ones employed in Egypt and Mesopotamia in terms of its practicability. Brahmi and Kharosthi, on the other hand were used officially and locally, and extant texts in these scripts have been deciphered to provide a clear picture of life in ancient India.

Amongst Indus, Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts, it is the Brahmi script that is considered to be the most important. All the modern scripts of India, the scripts of Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka and Tibet are derived from the Brahmi script. The Indian numerals are also considered to have evolved from the Brahmi script.

According to Dr. Harischandra Kaviratna, the art of writing in ancient India suffered a serious setback with the invasion of the Indus valley civilization by the Aryans, and from that time on, till the emergence of Buddhism one finds no evidence of written language in India. It is reasonable to assume that the Aryans may have learned the art from the native population, and employed the same to further their own purposes. Historical records suggest that Indian sages and Greek philosophers assembled in the courts of Asia Minor and Persia for discussions on a wide range of topics including religion, philosophy, medicine, astrology and science, from as early as the tenth century BC. Dr. Kaviratna goes on to assert that the art of writing in India is, in all probability, more ancient than the Phoenician alphabet. However, it faced the crisis of
exclusivism in the following centuries, being under the sole use of the Brahmin priests who used the *Vedas*, and their knowledge of the script for usurping as much power as possible. The art of writing could break free from this bondage only after the appearance of Buddha and the spread of Buddhism. It comes as no surprise then, says Dr. Kaviratna that the

...oldest manuscripts on bark or palm leaf known in India are Buddhist; that the earliest written records on stone and metal are Buddhist; that it is the Buddhists who first made use of writing to record their canonical books. And so it was that with the advent of the Buddha the art of writing was given renewed impetus, and began to rise in leaps and bounds from the gloomy limbo where it had been concealed for so long by the Brahman priests. (n.pag)

Having briefly explored the origins of writing in prominent civilizations across the world including in the Indian subcontinent, one cannot refute the materialistic argument for the impact of writing on a society put forward by anthropologist Bruno Latour. While writing systems may spread through the influence of religion, political conquests, trade and commerce, the reason for its persistence in the human sphere is because it is useful for work, and is adaptable across all spheres of activity. Latour’s argument also explains why writing systems have evolved towards the alphabetic – naturally, the alphabetic script is easier to master, easier to adapt to other languages and more efficiently ordered (Bazerman 19).

Equally intriguing in the history of language is the growth, development, and the rise to and fall from power of languages at one time or the other on the world stage. David Crystal states that all languages serve the social and psychological needs of the speech community, and are thus “equal” (*The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* 6). However, the tides
of time have seen the rise of certain languages to a position of supremacy. The first to rise to this position was Greek, which was followed by Latin, and then by English.

Greece is undoubtedly one of the most distinguished amongst the nations of antiquity; her legacy remains unrivalled – the Greeks carried their governmental institutions, arts and sciences to the zenith of perfection. It was in Greece that the idea of democracy was born, and there it grew to maturity. The humanistic and liberal education of Greece “provided an excellent combination of physical and moral, mental and aesthetic training, of supervision in youth with freedom in maturity” (Thekanady 166). Greek literature is an invaluable storehouse of theology, philosophy and music. To Greece, we owe the origin of drama; to her we owe the first written histories of the world. Oratory became an art in Greece; and she is the homeland of the Olympics. Science and medicine, art and architecture, religion and philosophy – countless are the Grecian influences in these myriad spheres.

From 800 to 650 BC, Greeks started migrating in all directions, establishing colonies in Sicily, Italy, Gaul, Africa and Egypt. Though independent of their home-cities, the language and literature, religion and traditions of Greece remained unchanged in these far-flung colonies. But what firmly established Greece on the world map is undoubtedly the military might of Alexander the Great. His empire which embraced the civilizations of Egypt, the Tygris-Euphrates valleys and the Indo-Gangetic Basin, were imperceptibly diffused with the Hellenistic style. The language of the Greeks thus pervaded a considerable part of the globe. This brought in its wake a unity in culture and universality in outlook, which eventually paved the way for the emergence of the Romans.

The political power of Rome has been lost in the ravages of time, but she has still left an indelible mark on the pages of history with her illustrious rulers like Julius Caesar and Augustus.
Caesar. Rome demonstrated to the world the working of a vast republic; the Roman republic extended over three continents. She upheld a spirit of compromise, and her law and order system created harmony and tranquility – known as Pax Romana or Roman Peace. Rome also played a significant part in creating the architectural symphony of the famed Greco-Roman style, and the spread of Grecian culture in distant lands. Latin literature is an inexhaustible treasure-trove of ideas, expressions and style. Rome produced some of the finest literary figures – Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Lucretius, Terence, Plautus, Juvenal, Cicero to name a few.

Rome was also the seat of Christianity, and once the religion spread around the world, Latin became the most prominent among the world languages. Philosophical and theological treatises, and the prayers of the Church came to be written in Latin. In fact, most of the important and magnificent works of Christianity were written under Roman rule. Thus Latin gained ascendancy through religion and political power.

Greek and Latin were for centuries considered the epitome of excellence in Western Europe. The main reason for this is not far to seek; both these languages, as already mentioned, had the credit of expressing some of the finest thoughts through the literature of the time. Religious influence, political and military might, and economic power are definitely on the fore when one considers the supremacy of one language over the others. The effect of this supremacy wielded by Greek and Latin is evident to this date – the study of modern languages is influenced by the practices of the Latin and Greek linguistic scholars (Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* 7).

Greek and Latin had to gradually cede their supreme position to English. This was undoubtedly, due to the new imperialism, which was set in motion from 1870 onwards. The Industrial Revolution, coupled with a greed for power and prestige, habitable lands and
investable enterprises led to the gradual colonization of the East by the West. Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Germany, Russia, Italy, Holland and Belgium established colonies in Africa and eastern Asia. Amongst these nations, the British came to be in course of time, the most powerful colonizers, with more than two million square miles of colonized territory under their control. Colonialism collapsed in the twentieth century, but it naturally followed that the language of the colonizers became one of its lasting legacies. English thus emerged as a language with the second largest number of users in the world.

Language serves as the means of communication, but with the proliferation of languages and dialects, there arose the problem of language barriers. Various solutions have been suggested to resolve the crisis – one, translating and interpreting, the possibility of which lies wholly in the development of computer applications; two, creation of an international auxiliary language such as Esperanto or simplification of an existing language for instance, Basic English, for international use; three, promoting an existing language as the world language; and four, to encourage and promote multilingualism in individuals and societies (Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* 343). While all these solutions have their advantages and disadvantages, it may be worthwhile to consider how the third alternative has to a great extent been already put into practice.

The reasons for the preference of English as a lingua franca are not far to seek. The economic and political progress of the English speaking nations of the world attests to English’s claim of being the world language. Crystal cites statistics to the effect that there are 400 million mother-tongue speakers of English, 350 million who use it as a second language, and 100 million who use it as a foreign language (*The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* 360).
Further, English is the official language in more than 60 countries, and is well-established in six continents. Science and technology, academics and business, advertising and entertainment, diplomacy and communication is all carried out to a good part in English. The proliferation of English through academics and through media of mass communication is very high. Taking into account all these it would be unfair to deny English its rightful position as the world language today.

David Crystal in his book, The English Language makes an observation which is pertinent to the study of English as a world language: “The emergence of second language varieties, and the uneasy relationship which sometimes exists between them and the standard British or American varieties, is a major feature of the current world English language situation” (258). He illustrates this by citing the English used in India – called “South Asian English”, as the clearest example. Within India, one sees different varieties of English, from pidgin English at one end of the scale to a variety closely resembling Standard English at the other. There is also an awareness of finer linguistic features like Received Pronunciation. These varieties have developed gradually as a result of colonialism and other factors, and one sees the richness and diversity most strikingly in the lexical items found in these varieties. Words have been borrowed from the local Indian languages, existing English words have been combined in novel ways, and some words have been given new connotations.

Pronunciation is markedly different, mainly influenced by the fact that Indian languages are spoken with an equal distribution of stress, as compared to the strong and weak stress patterns in English. The retroflex sounds ‘t’ and ‘d’ are pronounced with the tip of the tongue curled back, as it is done in the native languages. Crystal also points out very pertinent differences in grammar:
The use of the ‘progressive’ form of such verbs as have, know, think or understand: *I am understanding it now, He is knowing the answer.*


Collective nouns are often made plural: *litters* (waste paper), *fruits* (fruit), *aircrafts* (aircraft).

Unfamiliar compound nouns appear: *chalk-piece, key-bunch, school-goer.*

Prepositions are sometimes used in different ways: *pay attention on, accompany with, combat against.*

The word order of certain constructions can vary: *Eggs are there* (for British *There are eggs*), *Who you have come to see?* *(Who have you come to see?)*

Tense usage may alter: *I am here since this morning.*

*Isn’t it?* is often used at the end of a sentence in an invariable way (like *n’est-ce pas* in French): *You’re going now, isn’t it?* *(The English Language 259-260)*

Crystal also makes the remark that the prolonged presence of British colonizers in the country, and the large population of India, has led to the development of South Asian English to a more distinctive level as compared to other countries where English is a second language. He also makes the prediction that a country which uses English as its main medium of communication will in due course develop its own rules of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary *(The English Language 260).*

Tracing the growth and spread of English in India brings to light a very interesting fact: India has the third largest English speaking population in the world after the United States and the United Kingdom. While colonialism marked the entry of the English language into India, thereafter the spread and growth of English language in the country can be briefly classified into
three phases. The first phase, dating back to 1759, began with Christian missionaries setting up English-medium schools in India. Their noble aim, very much similar to the colonizers, was to bring out the natives from the darkness of ignorance and superstition to the light of the Christian faith. As English education was seen as a means of securing a clerical job, there was a growing preference for English-medium schools over the vernacular schools.

Macaulay’s minutes of 1835 established English as the language of the government and the language of power in India: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect.” This period marks the second phase, wherein the language English was used to create social divisions in India. An English education helped the native to do the menial jobs of the East India Company, but it served more of the latter’s greed than the former’s intellectual growth. Since printed vernacular literature was non-existent, education, it was argued, could be best imparted in English.

The third phase is the post-colonial India, where despite efforts to oust it from its position of supremacy, English continues to maintain its stronghold in all public domains. Language reforms suggesting granting importance to mother tongue and regional languages were defeated in the face of strong partisan objections. While North Indian states opposed learning a South Indian language; South Indian states refused to accede to the supremacy of Hindi. Thus the three language formula put forward by the government failed in its attempt, and states like Tamil Nadu and Nagaland adopted a two language formula – their mother tongue and English. In fact, the July 9, 2014 Kochi edition of Hindu newspaper reported an instance in the Kerala Assembly wherein a member had raised a question in the national language Hindi, but was reminded that as per Rule 305, only English, Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada are permitted in the Assembly. This
is proof of how strong sentiments are with regard to language use in the country. English is now the associate official language of the country. It is also the language of higher education within the country.

With higher education in the country being delivered in English, English literacy is a must. However, as discussed earlier, with the wide variety of the English language coexisting in the country, which variety needs to be taught and reckoned as marking language literacy remains a bone of contention. M.A. K. Halliday suggests two basic criteria which will help in ascertaining whether a variety of English is “acceptable for use as an educational model”. One, it should be used by a relatively large proportion of the population, especially by the literate class. Two, there should be mutual intelligibility with the other varieties of English which are in use by “similar professional and educated groups in other countries”. This implies that Indian English or any other variety of English is acceptable, provided it meets these criteria. It also makes it clear that a non-native speaker of the language need not struggle under the onus of speaking like a native-speaker either (Halliday 296).

While these suggestions are reasonable, it might be early days yet to put into practice a system of education using the Indian English variety. As of now, the Indian education system – from the primary to the tertiary levels and beyond, relies on Standard English. It is understood that this variety would ensure smooth and efficient communication with a wider and non-regional audience. The responsibility of the teacher, in this situation, is to acknowledge the social and educational relevance of Standard English, without in any way ignoring the linguistic background of the student: as it is on this foundation that all further linguistic accomplishment is to be built up (Wikinson 43).
The relevance of a standard variety of a language cannot be downplayed. How they may have evolved or may have been imposed is not important, when one considers the distinct advantage provided by a

…largely agreed and codified version of the language for purposes of national and international communication. The grammar and the vocabulary of the different international Englishes are relatively homogeneous and provide an existing base for communication in the written language and in formal contexts of spoken language use. Second, it is necessary therefore to emphasize the importance of teaching and learning Standard English. Third, variations cannot be lightly dismissed or ignored. There are certainly dangers that variation can lead to some difficulties in communication; that, in the absence of a codified, standardized version of the language, different varieties can result in excessively fragmented forms; and that, in such a situation, English may, rather like Latin, cease to function as an international language in the future. (Wikinson 58-59)

This prediction of a situation wherein different varieties of the language may exist side by side, may gradually lead to a situation wherein English’s status as an international language is detrimentally affected. But as David Crystal points out, with the scope for greater interaction provided by travel and communication technologies, it would be impossible to judge whether the balance will tilt in favour of unification or diversification.

The immediate concern is not whether such a unification or diversification will take place in the future, but what may be done in the present when there is no such diversification, and individual eccentricities in language use are leading to mutual unintelligibility – mainly in the sphere of writing, as practiced by the younger generation.
It may also be worth remembering that more than a hundred years ago, linguists had predicted that the American and British varieties of the English language would be mutually unintelligible by now, but this has not come to pass (Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* 359). In a similar manner, Wikinson’s prediction may also be proved wrong in due course. Meanwhile, the wisest course of action would be to teach the students to communicate in the standard version of the language – be it in speech or writing.

It seems appropriate at this juncture to introduce the concept of the power of writing, which will affirm that the aim of this research is justified. Writing, though it might have evolved much later in the history of language, has nevertheless gone on to become one of the most powerful influences in the civilized world. The well-known adage ‘The pen is mightier than the sword’ reflects this power in a brilliant manner. Of course, while the pen may be thought of as only a symbol in this instance, and could denote the ‘word’, and thereby the might of the ‘word’ over ‘force’, the maxim attains a higher level of precision when it is taken to denote the written word. The written word can very often bring about a lot of changes in perspective and thinking which sheer brute force fails to accomplish.

Consider the example of pamphlets and missives used by freedom fighters and activists; these succeeded because they allowed the recipient time to think and absorb the crux of the message. It appealed to both the intellect and the emotion. A fiery speech by an activist might rouse strong emotions in the audience, but the immediate nature of the situation could also diminish the chances of the intellect being engaged in the process.

This point can be further illustrated by taking the example of the difference in the way the same story may be depicted in print and media journalism. A television report of a socially-
relevant issue today, complete with inputs from not just the reporters but also social and political leaders and representatives of the public, very often descends into a chaos of voices and opinions. The viewer can only take in information; his/her intellect cannot be fully engaged when it is being constantly bombarded with information in this way. Of course, there is nothing to prevent this from happening afterwards if the viewer is so inclined.

But in the case of a newspaper report on the same issue, the reader processes the information in what may be, for the sake of comparison, called a more linear fashion, makes the connections on his/her own, and more often than not, the reflective process which engages one’s intellect is already working while reading.

This is not to mean that oral communication does not bring about changes in the world. It certainly does, and it is imperative in human relations. Our day-to-day life revolves around oral communication. However, oral communication is a product of the present moment in time, and its influence is by and large, limited to the present. Further, since the reach of oral communication can be limited, the changes could also be limited. In the case of written communication, time is never a constraint. Once created, the written word exists for eternity, and its influence will continue in varying degrees for as long as it is read. In fact this is how the corpus of knowledge is built up.

The power of the written word is best illustrated through literature, one of its most prolific prodigies. A piece of literature written centuries ago continues to entertain us, moves us to tears or laughter, and provokes us to examine life from a different perspective. This is indeed, one of the unique qualities of literature: that which makes it what it is. Conversely, a recorded speech from long ago could fail to ignite a spark in us because of its very distance from us in time. This is not to mean that powerful speeches delivered long ago do not appeal to us today, but the loss
of contemporaneity can often dull its effect. Reading the very same lines, many a time, evokes more strong responses.

As the true craftsman is the one who knows best the power of his craft, the writer is usually the best person to comment on the power of writing. Paulo Coelho, the Brazilian novelist and one of the bestselling writers of our time, draws our attention very subtly to the power of writing in one of his works *The Fifth Mountain*.

*The Fifth Mountain* narrates the story of the prophet Elijah who is forced to flee from his land Israel, after incurring the displeasure of Jezebel, the Phoenician born wife of Israel’s King Ahab, who had ordered the worship of the Phoenician gods in Israel. Ironically, Elijah is guided by an angel to take refuge in the Phoenician city of Zarephath, where he befriends a widow and her son. Though he is initially treated with mistrust, Elijah soon becomes an important figure in the political scene of Zarephath, and a trusted aide of the governor. He is however, viewed with suspicion by the high priest, who has his own agenda. The narrative moves through the sacking of Zarephath by the Assyrian army, and the rebuilding of Zarephath by Elijah and the survivors. It is through the character of the high priest that Coelho opens the doors to the discussion of the power of writing. While the high priest sees Elijah as a threat and wants to do away with him, he is keener to do away with Byblos, the form of writing developed by his countrymen, which he sees as something displeasing to the gods, and a threat to the order of the universe. The threat is beautifully summed up by Coelho.

His country had developed a form of writing accessible to all, even to those who were unprepared to use it. Anyone could learn it in a short time, and that would mean the end of civilization. The high priest knew that, of all the weapons of
destruction that man could invent, the most terrible—and the most powerful—was the word.

Daggers and spears left traces of blood; arrows could be seen at a distance. Poisons were detected in the end and avoided.

But the word managed to destroy without leaving clues. If the sacred rituals became widely known, many would be able to use them to attempt to change the Universe, and the gods would become confused.

Till that moment, only the priestly caste knew the memory of the ancestors, which was transmitted orally, under oath that the information would be kept in secret. Or else years of study were needed to be able to decipher the characters that the Egyptians had spread throughout the world; thus only those who were highly trained—scribes and priests—could exchange written information.

Other peoples had their rudimentary forms of recording history, but these were so complicated that no one outside the regions where they were used would bother to learn them. The invention of Byblos, however, had one explosive aspect: it could be used in any country, independent of the language spoken. Even the Greeks, who generally rejected anything not born in their cities, had adopted the writing of Byblos as a common practice in their commercial transactions. As they were specialists in appropriating all that was novel, they had already baptized the invention of Byblos with a Greek name: alphabet. Secrets guarded through centuries of civilization were at risk of being exposed to the light. (43-44)
While this may sound like bigotry, the true power of writing is revealed at the end of the novel, when while rebuilding the sacked town of Zarephath, Elijah makes the survivors record the history of the town on clay tablets, thereby ensuring that the past is never lost in the ravages of time. He also ensures that everyone learns the characters of the Byblos, young and old, so that they would benefit in the long run. He knows that learning the script would stand them in good stead if the Assyrians come their way again, and even for trade and commerce to prosper.

This is only one instance from literature where the power of writing to do both good and bad are highlighted. True to the archetype, the novel depicts the ultimate victory of good over evil. While the high priest felt the invention of the script was the root cause of all evil, the reason why the gods of the Fifth Mountain permitted the sacking of Zarephath by the Assyrians, Elijah sees in the script a powerful tool which would serve them well in the future. What seemed evil to one is turned into good by another.

This instance is cited in this research work to suggest the power of writing, and also to reiterate how the spread of writing came to be perceived by the different classes of people. What the high priest fears, is not just the gods getting confused, he is concerned with the loss of power and position which will naturally follow if the word becomes accessible to all. This was the very reason education was denied to the lower castes by the higher castes, by the rulers to the ruled. Ideas spread faster once writing becomes accessible to all, and once writing is known to all the ideas cannot be stopped.

Education played a crucial role even in the Indian freedom struggle. The leaders of the freedom struggle were educated, some were even educated abroad, and they used the written word as effectively as the spoken word to further the cause of the freedom struggle. What the British thought would give them an interpreter class, led to the downfall of the British Empire in
the country instead. This is the power of the written word: what was earlier stated as the pen being mightier than the sword.

Given the power of the written word, it is without doubt essential to implement a corrective strategy in the writing skills of the younger generation, lest the power be unwittingly misused. However, since the implementation of such a strategy is taking place in a writing instruction system which has evolved over civilizations and centuries, it requires a foreknowledge of the history of writing instruction, before it is attempted. Hence, the history of writing instruction will be explored next.