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A paper was read entitled :—

"On the Devanagari or Sanscrit Alphabet" By Thomas Watts, Esq.

To judge from the terms in which the Devanagari alphabet has been spoken of by some philologists, it might have been deemed to be constructed on a system little short of perfection. The forms of the letters are indeed of an elegance which may well justify some warmth of eulogy. These forms, which were so totally unknown to the scholars of an age which has hardly passed away, and are so familiar to the eyes of thousands in our own, produce a favourable impression, even at first sight, by the union which they exhibit of variety and uniformity, of majesty and grace. Many of them present a combination of the straight line and the curve, which seems to be recognized as pleasing by almost every eye. This is far from being the case with the characters of some other alphabets. There is a wildness and extravagance about the forms of the Arabic letters, a shooting-up and a darting-down, an appearance of complication and involvement, which certainly are far from attractive to the beginner. In the Greek, there is a general air of pettiness, and in the smaller sort a conspicuous want of straight lines, which is not redeemed by any particular grace in the curvilinear ones which have been adopted. Perhaps, among the familiar alphabets, it is only the Hebrew which in point of appearance can sustain a comparison with the Devanagari, and in some respects may claim to be superior. The only drawback in the beauty of the Devanagari, and even this is not considered a drawback by some, is the almost unbroken horizontal line on which the letters appear to be filed, and which may be censured as too uniform and too stiff. The absence of this line is an advantage to Hebrew, and on the other hand the absence of 'points' is an advantage to Sanscrit. In other respects there is a sort of conformity to be observed between the two alphabets—they consist in general of letters of a similar height and size, as little apt to project much above the line as to dip much below it, and in their stately procession across a page, the individual characters have much of the aspect of the dignitaries of other alphabets—the capitals of the Greek and Roman, "unmix'd with baser matter." The few Greek books that have been printed entirely in capital letters have been much admired by bibliographers for the beauty of their appearance, and it has been said that a page of Latin, in the ordinary mixture of capitals and 'lower-case,' surpasses a page of English in its look, from the comparatively rare occurrence in Latin of letters that rise above or sink below the line. This indeed has been assigned as a

reason for the perseverance of type-founders in selecting for the theme of their specimens, a page of the Orations of Cicero. There can be no doubt that this merit, whatever its value, is largely possessed by the Devanagari.

It is not however to appearance only that the admirers of the Devanagari confine their eulogies. As compared with the Semitic languages, the Sanscrit has the important advantage of being written at full. Instead of specifying a few of the vowels only, and leaving the rest to deduction or conjecture, the Devanagari alphabet, like the Roman, expresses all. The vowels indeed are not always treated, as in the Roman, as of the same dignity as the consonants and marching in the same ranks; they sometimes only cling round the feet of the consonants or perch on their heads, but at all events in some shape they are present and have a recognized existence. How great this advantage is, can, perhaps, be properly appreciated only by the Semitic student, who has been painfully taught to feel, by every step of his experience, the thousand annoyances of the opposite system.

The copiousness of the Devanagari alphabet is another theme of praise. An injudicious parsimony in the invention of letters seems to have been the bane of European alphabets. In most of them we find fifty or sixty different sounds represented, or endeavoured to be represented, by between twenty and thirty different signs. Never surely was economy so ill-judged. If practised with the view of sparing the memory, the intention is certainly not answered. The effort which is necessary to remember in what positions a sign forfeits its ordinary attributes and has to assume new ones, is a strain on the memory much greater than that of remembering a few additional signs. This will be acknowledged by all who have had occasion to study the Slavonic languages, who must have remarked with what ease the few peculiar letters of Russian are learned by the scholar, and how much they smoothen his progress. The Russians have one letter for the English *ch*, another for the English *sh*, another for the sound of the English *s* in 'pleasure' and 'treasure,' and when once these are learned, all difficulty about them is at an end. It is painful to reflect how much time has been thrown away, how many thousand mistakes have been committed in pronunciation, are daily committing, and will probably be committed to the end of time, merely from the want of a distinct sign to represent one of these sounds, the English *ch* for instance, in the Roman alphabet. The English and Spaniards have adopted one method of writing it, the French another, the Italians a third, the Germans a fourth, the Poles a fifth, and so on, till at last the complication has become almost too intricate to unravel. While the Devanagari is judiciously copious in this respect, it is wisely economical in another, for it has no distinction of capitals and smaller letters,—a refinement, if it can be called a refinement, which loads the memory with two forms instead of one, for no perceivable purpose. It also avoids the Semitic absurdity of having different forms for a letter, according to its occurrence at the beginning, the middle, or the end of a word.

The order of writing in the Sanscrit language is the same as in

our own—from left to right, and of course directly opposed to the practice of the Semitic languages, which are written from right to left. This seems to be a matter perfectly indifferent, neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. The Chinese method of writing from the top of the page to the bottom is open to the objection, which is found in practice a serious one, that as the lines are usually longer in that direction than across, the eye has more trouble in catching the beginning of a fresh line. It has been justly observed, in the article on the Alphabet in the Penny Cyclopædia, that the *boustrophedon* method, in which the lines alternately run from right to left and from left to right, was more convenient to the eye than any of the methods which have obtained the preference in practice.

The arrangement of the characters of the Devanagari alphabet is a point in which it has also a claim for admiration. The ordinary alphabets present an appearance of absolute chaos in this respect. It is only by minute examination, by diligent tracing of their origin, and by very great ingenuity, that the reason of their present order of arrangement can be discovered. Of all these we have an excellent instance in the article on the Alphabet already quoted in the Penny Cyclopædia, which was subsequently enlarged and published in a separate shape by its author, whom the Philological Society is proud to claim as one of its members. In the Devanagari alphabet, on the contrary, the scientific nature of its arrangement is at once apparent. The vowels stand first in order, and the consonants follow disposed in certain classes, according to certain principles. This point is, perhaps, of more importance than it is generally thought. It might be unadvisable to propose to disturb the present order of our own letters, which, unscientific as it is, has the prescription of centuries in its favour; but every individual who has had to learn the Roman alphabet, has certainly lost time, in the aggregate amounting to days and weeks, from the difficulty in committing and also in recalling to memory its arbitrary sequence.

So far the Sanscrit or Devanagari system has not only sustained a parallel with the Roman, but often sustained it with advantage. This however is not the case in other respects.

The method of attaching some of the vowels to the consonants, which has been already alluded to, is certainly inferior both in simplicity and grace to that with which we are familiar in the Roman alphabet, of placing them in the same line. With one of the vowels, that which answers to the Roman short *i*, there is moreover a whimsical rule of Sanscrit orthography which gives rise to much inconvenience. Its position in a word as written is regulated to be *before* the consonant *after* which it is sounded in speaking. The rule is precisely as if our rule for writing the word *tin* were to arrange the letters thus, *i, t, n*—for *pit, i, p, t*, and so on. Strangely enough, a similar peculiarity with regard to the same vowel, finds place, as we are all aware, in some of the European languages. In the word *travailler*, for instance, in French, the *i* which is placed before the two *l*'s is sounded after them. In the Italian word *travaglio* there is something analogous, as the *g* before the *l* has no

connection with any sound before it, but influences the sound that follows; and the same observation may be made with regard to *gn* both in French and Italian. In the European languages, however, this misplacement of alphabetical signs occurs only with regard to a few particular letters, and the blemish to the alphabet, and inconvenience to the learner, are therefore of less consequence than in the Sanscrit, into which it introduces a needless intricacy which is often found troublesome.

The blemish however in regard to the short *i*, is as nothing in importance compared to that connected with the short *a*. The sound of this letter is of very frequent occurrence in Sanscrit. To save apparently the trouble of writing it too often, it has been made a rule of orthography not to write it at all except when it occurs at the beginning of a word. If no other vowel appears between two consonants in the middle of a word, a short *a* is assumed to be there, although not written. Thus in Sanscrit to spell the name of *Adam*, it is only necessary to put down the characters answering to *A*, *d* and *m*: there being no vowel present between the *d* and the *m*, a short *a* must be latent there according to rule, and the word is pronounced accordingly. There seems at first to be no material objection to this method, as there can be no ambiguity in it. In the cases where the vowels are not written in Arabic, or the other languages for which the Arabic alphabet is used, the student has often no means of knowing if the missing vowel be an *a*, an *e*, an *i*, an *o*, or a *u*, but in Sanscrit the very circumstance of the vowel's being missing shows unmistakeably that it is a short *a*. But to proceed: if no other vowel occurs at the end of a word, a short *a* is supposed to be there also. The letters *A*, *d*, *m* would therefore be read *Adama* but for an additional rule. When the word closes with a consonant, there is a peculiar negative sign to be affixed to the consonant to show that no vowel follows. There are thus four signs made use of to spell *Adam* in Devanagari, the letters *A*, *d*, *m*, and the negative sign to intimate that the *m* closes the word,—as many signs as are needed to spell it in the Roman alphabet, but under a system which requires a whole apparatus of explanation.

It would be well, however, if the difficulties ended here. Unfortunately, the use of the negative sign, as we have called it, is confined to the *end* of a word. There seems no reason why it should not have been employed in the middle as well; why, for instance, if a person writing in Devanagari wished to express the sound *Admetus*, he should not have affixed the negative sign between the *d* and *m* as well as after the *s*, and with the same effect. But it is not so,—by the rules of Sanscrit orthography this is inadmissible. The method which has been adopted in the middle of words is the great distinction between the Devanagari and all alien alphabets, and is a singular chapter in the history of wasted ingenuity. In the case mentioned, and in all other cases, which are of course innumerable, in which one consonant is to follow another in pronunciation, the two consonants are in writing to be “roll'd into one.” Each is to lose or modify its separate shape so as to unite with the other and form

a new compound character. Sometimes the forms of both are still well-preserved, and one is only braced to its companion or mounted upon it; sometimes, where the shapes do not so well agree, some refractory letter has to be so crushed as hardly to retain a vestige of its original form. Of course there will be two ways for every letter to combine, according as it comes first or last; if there is a form, for instance, for *d* to combine with *m*, when *d* comes first, there must be a form for the same two letters to combine when *m* comes first. Again, it may not be two consonants only that are to unite, but three, or four, or five, and here the same rules apply. If five consonants come together in Sanscrit, there must be a new character or combination of characters to represent those particular five consonants in that particular order of sequence.

There have been found enthusiasts of European birth who have learned to admire these rules of Indian origin, as something philosophical and refined. The same parties would probably have admired the Roman system of notation in preference to the Arabic, in case it could have been traced to a Sanscrit original. It is obvious at first sight, that by these arrangements the practical advantages of an alphabetical system are materially lessened,—the beautiful simplicity of its theory all but destroyed. The Devanagari alphabet is said to consist of fifty letters; but if we add these compound forms to the number,—and they have as much claim to be considered a part of the alphabet as our *x* and *w*,—the letters must be considered to be between four and five hundred. Not a single advantage is gained by all this complexity. Not a sound is expressed that could not be expressed as well without it. The result is, that the student of the language is often, after having made some proficiency, not able to read words at sight, but is brought to a standstill by arriving at some hitherto unknown cluster of consonants, all hanging together in a confusion which it requires both patience and skill to disentangle. From a matter so simple that few would suspect that it involved any difficulty at all, the ingenuity of the constructors of the Devanagari alphabet has contrived to manufacture almost a grammarful of perplexity.

There is a practical grievance connected with this unnecessary multiplicity of Sanscrit characters which has lately attracted some attention. It is evident that to the printer this state of affairs must abound with great inconveniences. For every combination of consonants throughout the language there must be a separate type. The quantity of additional labour entailed on the compositor as well as the typesetter is enormous. On some occasions, indeed, it has been considered more economical to lithograph a Sanscrit text than to go through the process of printing it. The natural result of this additional expense is an increase in the cost of books, which has been found an obstacle, and a serious one, to the progress of the study of the language. Professor Hermann Brockhaus, himself a Sanscrit scholar of great eminence, considers it useless to expect that under the present system the mass of Sanscrit literature can ever be made accessible in a printed form to the European student. In a pamphlet

he has published on the subject ("Vorschlag über den Druck Sanskritischer Werke mit Lateinischen Buchstaben,") he proposes to meet the difficulty in certain cases, by discarding the Devanagari alphabet and printing Sanscrit books in the Roman character, according to a settled system. By assigning a fixed representative for each of the Sanscrit letters, it is easy to present a text in the Roman character, which a competent scholar can reproduce with unerring certainty in Devanagari.

This proposal by Professor Brockhaus certainly strikes at the root of the evil. But it is ominous to observe that similar schemes have been proposed for other languages; but that even when they have been tried, they have never met with more than partial and temporary success. The system of Volney for getting rid of the cumbersome machinery of the Arabic points had certainly still more to recommend it than this system with Sanscrit, yet it has come to nothing. There seems to be a strong objection in every one's mind against cashiering an alphabet that has once been identified with a language. We know with what obstinacy some of the Anglo-Saxon scholars have contended for the preservation of a mere corruption of the Roman, and how strong an attachment the Germans have manifested for their peculiar form of the black letter. How few that have studied Greek could bear the notion of reading Homer or Euripides in the Roman character!

If we are guided therefore by what experience has sanctioned in the case of other languages, it would appear advisable to retain the Devanagari alphabet with its beautiful forms and its scientific arrangement. But with its advantages it is surely not necessary to retain its absurdities. It has already been pointed out that the alteration of a single rule, or rather the extension of a single principle, will suffice to introduce order and simplicity where before there was chaos and confusion. Let the use of what has been called the negative sign be introduced into the middle of a word as well as at the end; each consonant will then be written out at full in its proper order and its original form. The appearance of a Sanscrit book to the eye will be materially improved, and after a short practice there will be no more difficulty in reading Sanscrit, or rather there will be less, than in reading Greek or Russian. The change, in fact, would bear a strong analogy to that which has been made in Greek by discarding the Greek *nerus*, and in Latin, at an earlier period, by abandoning the Latin contractions, a fertile source of useless trouble. The expense of cutting types, and the difficulty of setting books in type, would be reduced in an equal ratio to the difficulty of reading them, and in time to come it would perhaps be as unlikely to meet with a Sanscrit scholar in favour of the old method, as with a Grecian who would wish to return to the uncial letters and the conglomerated words of the Alexandrian manuscript from the types of a Foulis or a Bodoni.